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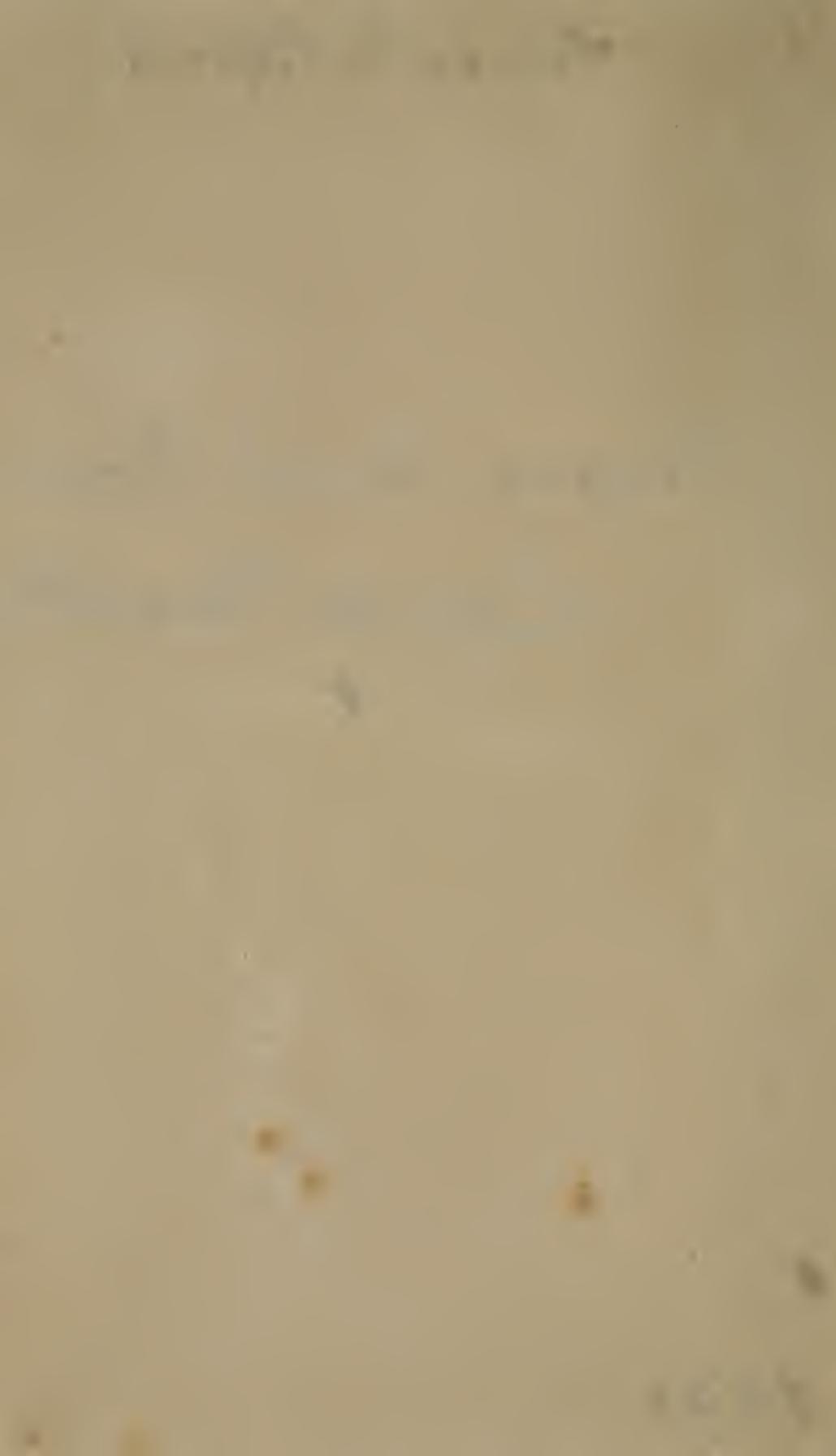


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Ludgate Monthly

1891



THE ACADEMICIAN.

BY

HENRY ERROLL,

AUTHOR OF "AN UGLY DUCKLING."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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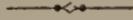
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THE ACADEMICIAN.

CHAPTER I.

NEW ARRANGEMENTS.

“ I DON’T like it—I don’t like it at all, my dear,” said Mr. Chesham, in what would have been, in any one else, a distinctly fretful tone.

His wife looked up from the pile of socks her patient fingers were busily darning, and asked with a smile, in which were involved the love and admiration of ten years—

“ What don’t you like, my love ? ”

“This turning our home into a sort of boarding-house,” said Mr. Chesham, impatiently whisking away a fly which persisted in settling on his august nose.

“Oh, you mean Miss Durant’s coming. Stay, you have let your newspaper fall;” and the alert little woman darted up, picked up the *Times*, and laid it on her husband’s knee, dropping a kiss at the same time on his plump white hand.

“Thanks, dearest. Yes, I mean Miss Durant’s coming. It is hard—more than hard—that I should be obliged to admit a stranger within my family circle—my precious family circle.”

Mrs. Chesham smiled fondly at him. “It won’t be like a stranger, darling. Miss Durant is only just a girl, like our Mabel. You can think she is a visitor.”

Mr. Chesham shook his head.

“No, pet; she will never seem like a visitor. It is hard—very hard. By Jupiter!” he exclaimed, after a pause, during which he had been thoughtfully rapping the nails of one hand with those of the other, “I cannot stand it. I will telegraph at once, and put her off; and you must write, making some excuse for changing our plans.”

“Oh, George!” faltered little Mrs. Chesham, “think again. The money will come in so very handy for Willie’s school-bills; and the—the wine-merchant worries so to be paid. Constance shall be kept out of your way—indeed she shall, my love; but do let her come. It will be such an advantage to Mabel in every way, too.”

“Of course!” muttered Mr. Chesham, a gloomy look on his florid, flaccid face. “Well, I could not bear to be selfish——”

“You never are, love,” interpolated Mrs. Chesham, letting fall her sock and casting an admiring look at her lord and master.

“—but one thing I would like to ask for,” continued Mr. Chesham, acknowledging the compliment by a bend of the head. “It is only a little thing, but it would make all the difference in the world to my life.”

“My poor darling!” cried his wife eagerly. “What is it?”

“I should like to have the *Times* bought altogether, instead of being taken in for an hour. You cannot conceive, my love, the worry that hour has been to me. I have never mentioned it—you know how averse I am from calling attention to any little privation which affects no one but myself—but I may say that the thought of that hour has haunted me day and night. I

have never felt in the mood for reading the news when the boy has brought the *Times*. The very thought of being ordered, as it were, to read now made me invincibly disinclined to doing so; and, then, just as I had overcome the feeling and had settled down comfortably, the bell would ring, and that confounded—I beg your pardon, my dear—that boy would call for the paper.”

Having concluded this somewhat long speech, Mr. Chesham reclined his head wearily against the back of his very easy chair, and took a cough lozenge.

His wife had been gazing at him with a remorseful countenance. “My poor George!” she said. “I have noticed a hundred times how it annoyed you to part with the *Times* when the boy came; and yet, do you know, it never even occurred

to me to do as you suggest, and as of course shall be done now. It only shows how thoughtless habit makes one."

Her husband elevated his chin and breathed a loud acquiescent sigh. Just then the door was opened, certainly not noisily, but not silently enough to avoid giving a shock to highly strung nerves, as was shown by the sensitive little shudder which shook Mr. Chesham's shoulders. No one appeared, but a voice, the chief characteristic of which was its exceptionally melodious clearness, said—

"Mother."

"Yes, darling," responded Mrs. Chesham, with a nervous glance towards the arm-chair, and getting up so hurriedly as to upset her work-basket with all its odds and ends.

"Can I speak to you a minute?"

“Yes, dear. Wait until I have picked up my things,” said the little woman, going down on her knees.

“Oh, have you dropped your basket? Don’t kneel. I’ll pick them up in a minute.”

The owner of the voice here entered the room, and proved to be a tall girl of twenty-two or thereabouts. She lost no time in kneeling down by her mother, and began sweeping the things back into the basket with wonderful quickness.

Mr. Chesham had been tapping his finger-nails together ever since the first opening of the door. When the new-comer had travelled on her knees quite underneath the table, in search of some particularly adventurous reels of cotton, he said in a tone expressive of saintlike patience—

“Perhaps, Mabel, you have not observed that you have left the door open.”

An inarticulate exclamation issued from beneath the table.

Mr. Chesham continued—

“If I thought that a current of air would benefit your mother or yourself in the slightest degree, I would gladly welcome any inconvenience or annoyance it might bring to myself. As it is, however——”

Here the girl suddenly emerged from her hiding-place, dropped the last reels into the work-basket, seized her mother's arm, and was in the hall, with the door shut, before the “however,” drawled out to its utmost capabilities, had come to an end.

“Oh, Mabel,” remonstrated Mrs. Chesham, with a little gasp, “you shouldn't be so

violent; indeed you shouldn't. My dear, he hadn't finished speaking."

"Well, he can finish in there, all by himself," said Mabel, with an irreverent laugh. "At the rate he was talking at he'll about have finished that sentence by luncheon time."

"Oh, Mabel!" her mother began again. But Mabel interrupted.

"I want to know where that dear little table I got for Constance's room has gone. I've just finished the cover for it, and now the table itself seems to have vanished."

Mabel looked at her mother severely. Mrs. Chesham gazed up the stairs, then at her daughter's waistband, then at her own work-marked forefinger, and finally said in a very small voice—

"My dear, that table didn't suit the room."

“Didn’t suit the room!” cried Mabel. “Why, if the table had been specially designed and made for the room, or if the room had been built up round the table, they couldn’t have gone together better. Besides, mother, *I* was to do Constance’s room. Where is that table?”

Mrs. Chesham clasped her hands.

“My darling,” she faltered, “Geo—George——”

“Aha!” said Mabel triumphantly; “I’ve been waiting for George. Well—George?”

“George said—— You’ve no right to speak to your mother like that, Mabel,” said Mrs. Chesham, suddenly turning the tables upon her daughter. “*I am* your mother, and he——”

“Is *not* my father, thank Heaven!” finished Mabel fervently. Then, drawing

her mother into the dining-room, she put her into a chair, and patted her shoulder caressingly, saying—

“Never mind, poor little mother. I guessed where it was, of course, only I thought I would make you confess. It’s in his room, I suppose?”

Mrs. Chesham nodded, and said with more courage—

“Yes, dear. And he has been so kind. He has actually said that you may have that flower-stand of his—you know, the one that stands in the window—for Miss Durant’s room.”

“Oh, has he?” returned Mabel, with a curl of her very short upper lip. “He is really too kind. That old flower-stand! Dear me!”

“Where are you going, dear?” asked Mrs. Chesham in alarm, as her daughter,

with her back very straight, marched towards the door.

“For the table!” answered Mabel innocently, raising her eyebrows a little as she turned her head to answer her mother.

“*Mabel!*” cried Mrs. Chesham, fairly springing out of her chair with dismay. “You wouldn’t—oh, you wouldn’t——”

“Yes, I would,” said Mabel firmly. “You needn’t worry about it, mother. We shall have to put our foot, or our feet, down sooner or later, and we may as well do it sooner. We can’t take all the money Miss Durant is going to pay us, and allow her to be done out of a single thing.”

“Such a *little* table——” began Mrs. Chesham. But her inexorable daughter interrupted once more.

“If it were only a box of matches, and had been bought with *that* money, it must

be given up; unless, indeed," she added, with a little smile, "you would like me to ask him for the money to buy another with."

"Oh, don't ask him for money. Anything is better than that."

"Then——" said Mabel; and, without more ado, she walked across the passage, by courtesy termed a hall, and opened the door of Mr. Chesham's room.

Her stepfather was leaning back, with closed eyes. The girl took in the position of the table at a glance. It was by his very side, neatly arranged with a little cover, and holding his book, his box of cough lozenges, his paper-knife, and the glass of water he always kept by him.

Mabel calmly and quietly removed these objects to the chair that had, until now, done service in the room of a table, took

up the subject of dispute, and left the room.

Her mother was peeping anxiously round the dining-room door.

“How did he take it? Did he look vexed?” she eagerly asked.

“He had his eyes shut,” answered Mabel.

“Asleep?”

“No, he was not asleep; but his eyes were shut, and he did not open his mouth. Good-bye for the present, mother dear; I am just going to finish that room. Don't go back there and offer yourself up as a sacrifice yet awhile. Have a little cosy nap in the dining-room,” said Mabel, vanishing upstairs with her prize.

Mrs. Chesham crossed the hall on tiptoe as soon as her daughter was out of sight, listened for a moment at her husband's

door, and then stole cautiously away in the direction of the kitchen, to give "an eye" to some extra culinary arrangements in honour of their guest's arrival, which lay heavy on her already overburdened little mind.

Upstairs, in a rather large, bright, and very prettily and daintily furnished sitting-room, Mabel was putting the finishing touches to her handiwork, with a bitter smile on her face which was not pleasant to see.

"Hateful old wretch!" she muttered, as she maliciously put the rescued table down with a little thump just over where she supposed her step-father's head to be. "How mother ever could have seen anything in him! Poor, gentle, weak mother! Oh, if I were only a *man*!"

These last words were accompanied by

a very suggestive tightening of the lips, and clenching of the hand, which, although neither small nor weak, was very far from masculine-looking.

No one else, seeing Mabel as she stood arranging her flowers in a vase on the little table, would have echoed the wish she had just uttered. She was tall and finely made, neither too slender nor too robust, holding herself straight and erect, her head proudly set on her shoulders; her eyes were dark grey, her hair dark brown, her mouth a sweet and lovable one—when its expression was not marred as just now. She was a very pretty girl, richly gifted in almost every way by Nature. She was quite aware of the fact, and grateful for it; but she was one other thing, for which she was very far from grateful—she was George Chesham's step-daughter.

It did sometimes seem more than a little hard that her life should have been made such an uncomfortable one, simply because her mother had allowed herself to be married to a man who, Mabel was sure, could never have been anything but what he now was—objectionable. She and her mother might have been so happy together. The little income, which was a tight fit for four, would have been ample for two people, both of them women; and it would have been so pleasant to have her mother all to herself, serene and smiling, as she remembered her in the days before her second marriage. What a gay little mother she had been then! Always ready for a romp, or to tell stories, or play at dolls; never flurried or put out by anything. It had not taken long to change her. Very soon after Mr. Chesham had

obtained possession of Mrs. Moore and her income, he had found the arduous post which he held in a Government office "too much" for him, and had relinquished it, intending, he informed his wife, to look out for something lighter. To "look out," however, it is necessary to use one's eyes, and as Mr. Chesham's particular disease necessitated his keeping those organs closed during a large part of the day, his "looking out" resulted in nothing more than his obtaining a very clear insight into his own perfections—an insight which, however valuable and interesting to himself, was not productive from a pecuniary point of view.

No more time for Mabel with her mother now. Mrs. Chesham had not even leisure to play with the new baby, Willie; he was made over to Mabel, while the mother

nursed her husband, and tried hard to soothe the lot which, he said, was such a bitter one. Mabel had never liked her step-father, but when she saw her mother degenerate from a brisk, healthily cheerful matron into the nervous, timid, shrinking creature she now was, Mr. Chesham became detestable to her. The money which came from her own dead father, and which should have been spent on forwarding her education, went to pay the "invalid's" wine bill and cigar merchant. She had to finish growing up as best she could, with the unsatisfactory feeling strong upon her that her step-father regarded her as an interloper, and would have been glad of any opportunity of getting rid of her.

If it had not been for her mother's sake, Mabel would have preferred to go out as a governess, or to try any other way of

gaining a livelihood away from the house which Mr. Chesham called "home;" but she knew that her mother depended upon her for help and protection, and she loved her mother very dearly. With endless perseverance and trouble, she had cultivated a gift she possessed for painting, and lately she had made one or two portraits of friends, which had succeeded very fairly, and for which she had received a modest sum. This fact made an enormous difference to her, and even helped her to regard Mr. Chesham with a more humorous and less personal eye.

She was looking forward very much to Constance Durant's coming. She had known her for two or three years past, and had paid two long visits to Layton Abbey, where Constance lived with her aunt, Miss Durant.

Constance and Hubert Durant were the orphan children of Miss Durant's half-brother, Francis, who had started in life with a good fortune and fair prospects, but who had muddled away the first, and blasted the latter in a wonderfully short time, putting the crowning-point to his innumerable follies by taking to wife a pretty, silly girl, who, after doing her very best to entangle his affairs yet more inextricably, died in giving birth to her second child. Mr. Durant had struggled on for a few years, borrowing here, spending there, going from bad to worse, but always managing to keep some sort of a roof over his motherless children's heads. Frequent letters—letters which grew always more incoherent—found their way to the stately old house where dwelt Miss Durant, who had been a considerable heiress on

her mother's side. The maiden lady had been wont to give a grim sneer at the sight of the well-known, untidy handwriting, which she just glanced at before tearing up envelope and enclosure unopened, and consigning them to her waste-paper basket. She would help Francis Durant no more; she had helped him enough.

But, when one day she received a letter from her half-brother's landlady, intimating that her lodger was dead and that his children were friendless, penniless, and alone, Miss Durant never hesitated for an instant. Her maid was immediately despatched to London, with orders to see that everything necessary was done, and to bring the children back with her to Layton Abbey. Miss Durant meant to do her duty by her orphan nephew and niece,

but the duty turned out, in the case of one of them at least, to be a pleasure. The little girl, Constance, never succeeded in winning her aunt's heart. She was timorous and nervous. The only person with whom she was thoroughly at home was a woman named Robson, who had been the children's nurse in London, and whom Miss Durant had retained as Constance's maid.

The boy, Hubert, who was a year or two older than his sister, had, on the other hand, taken his aunt's heart by storm. He was a handsome, bright little fellow, who had made sure of a welcome at Layton Abbey, and had from the first hour treated stern old Miss Durant with a fearless confidence which suited that lady exactly. Miss Durant was wont to be extreme in her feelings, and she had loved

this boy with an all-absorbing, vehement, jealous love, sometimes almost painful to see.

Hubert was not allowed to go away to school; he had the best tutor that could be procured, who was perpetually harassed by appeals not to allow his pupil to work too hard. When Mr. Wrack's mission was ended, and it was time to think of Oxford or Cambridge, Miss Durant found all her plans overthrown. She had long been dreading the evil day when she would be obliged to separate from her beloved boy, who, now that he had reached the stature of manhood, was more the light of her eyes than ever. She had seriously contemplated taking a house in Oxford, so as to be near him; but when she cautiously sounded Hubert himself on the subject, his first word dashed all her hopes to the ground.

The boy had long been fretting under the tightness of the bonds by which his aunt kept him attached to her apron-strings. He was aware of her intentions with regard to his future. He was to go to the University, thence to return to her side to begin the existence of a country squire, an existence which Miss Durant considered preferable to any other on earth. He would in time become possessor of Layton Abbey, would marry some girl chosen for him by his aunt, would have a large family of children, and, in short, would "live respected and die lamented."

This ideal life seemed to Hubert to promise nothing but utter weariness; he felt that it would be simply intolerable to him. He had another and a very different purpose in life. His intention was to become an artist. Ever since he had

been able to hold a pencil, the greatest pleasure he had known had been his drawing. The margins of his old school-books were covered with soldiers, animals, and portraits of everybody about the place, from his tutor down to the knife-boy. Miss Durant had of course noticed his facility, but it had never for one single moment occurred to her as possible that her nephew could wish to be an artist in all sober earnest. When at length the unwelcome truth was forced upon her, her indignation and disappointment knew no bounds.

What! He, a Durant, fancy he was a genius! Thank God, their family had never produced such a sport of nature. Clever and cultivated men they had always been, with the exception of Hubert's own father; but workmen—never! If Hubert

loved his painting so, why, he could have his studio at Layton Abbey, and amuse himself with his colours in his spare moments ; but take up art as a regular profession ! The idea was absurd ! He would ? He must ? Then, if he persisted in his refusal to give up this—just this one little thing—for the sake of his second mother, he should go away for ever. No professional artist should inherit Layton Abbey, to profane it with the society of his vulgar Bohemian acquaintances. If he would not obey her, then Edward Beaumont, who was content to be an ordinary English gentleman, and who had more right to the place than any Durant, should have it at her death.

The poor old lady tried threats, coaxing, promises, but all to no purpose. Hubert could not give up the art which called to

him so imperiously ; and, in spite of many heart-burnings, and a good deal of genuine sorrow at thus disappointing and wrecking the hopes of his aunt, to whom he owed so much, and whom he really loved and honoured, he packed up his things and left Layton Abbey, to return no more.

Miss Durant had withheld all supplies at first, deeming this the most likely way of bringing the offender to his senses ; but when she found, on inquiry, that Hubert was sharing the studio of a friend but little less badly off than himself, sleeping on the floor, and working vigorously all day, she instructed her lawyers to write and inform him that his aunt intended to allow him one hundred pounds a year, which was all he must ever expect of her, unless he returned to Layton Abbey.

Hubert accepted, for his art's sake, and

wrote his aunt a letter, of which she took no notice, but which was under her pillow when she died. From the day of Hubert's departure until Miss Durant's death, aunt and nephew never met again. They were both obstinate, although Miss Durant termed her own conduct "firmness," and Hubert's "pigheadedness;" and if their hearts often yearned towards each other, neither of them made any sign.

Miss Durant did not live very long. She faded slowly but surely from the time Hubert went away. Her indomitable spirit held her up to the last; but even that had to give way in the end, and a few weeks after she took to her bed, she passed away, relentless to the end, leaving Hubert the hundred a year, Layton Abbey to Edward Beaumont, and twenty thousand pounds to her niece Constance.

Constance's dismay at her aunt's will was genuine. She had never really believed it possible that Hubert would be disinherited.

"But after all, nurse," she said to Robson, "it doesn't much matter whether Aunt Sarah left the money to me or to Hubert. If Hubert had had it, of course I should have lived with him; and as I've got it, why, naturally he'll live with me. It all comes to the same!"

But Hubert absolutely and entirely refused to accept one farthing of his sister's fortune, and silenced her so decisively when she grew importunate, that she never ventured to refer to the subject again.

"But what am I to do?" she asked plaintively. "I can't go and live all by myself."

"You must find some nice family with

whom you can live," said Hubert, after a pause—"have your own rooms and all that, you know. Unless you'd like to take a little house, and have a companion—some pleasant, middle-aged person, who would take good care of you."

"Oh no, thank you!" cried Connie. "That would be horrid. Just like having a governess again!"

"Well, think," said Hubert. "Is there any family you know of with whom you could live?"

"There are the Cheshams," said Connie, after a moment's reflection.

"Ah—yes," Hubert replied, a shade of colour mounting to his face, "the Cheshams. They would do very well. Only they live in London."

"I will not live anywhere but in London," said Constance resolutely.

“And then, would they care to have a stranger in the house?”

“I know they are very poor. Mabel told me so herself the last time she stayed with us.”

“Well, at all events we might inquire. I am sure they would not be offended. And I should very much like you to be with the Cheshams,” said Hubert.

So it had been arranged, and now Mabel was looking forward to Constance's coming.

Old Miss Durant had been very fond of Mabel; it was she who had given her her first commission, namely, a portrait of herself, intended as a gift for her nephew. But Hubert had gone away just before its completion, and Miss Durant had generously, if unflatteringly, presented the

artist with her own work, remarking that it would serve to remind her of an unhappy old woman.

Mabel had liked Constance, although she had really seen but very little of her, Miss Durant having always appropriated her niece's visitor from the day of her arrival, somewhat to both the girls' chagrin.

But now Constance was coming—her own mistress, free to do as she chose with her time and her friendship, and what more natural than that they should be great, great friends? Mabel led a lonely life between her mother and step-father. She went out very little, for she could not invite people to her mother's house, and was too proud to accept invitations which she suspected were bestowed out of compassion. With Constance, however,

it would be a different thing. Connie would be glad of her company, and when she saw how dearly Mabel would love her, she would quickly return her affection. Dear Constance! Of course she would love her. Was she not the sister of——

But at this point in her reflections Mabel frowned reprovingly, and, with a shake of the head at herself, proceeded with her work. Everything was in order by the time a cab drew up at the door, with Connie's voluminous boxes on its top.

Mabel darted downstairs to welcome her friend. A mass of silk and crape was handed out by a young man who had come in the cab with it; a hard-featured, more than middle-aged woman followed. The silk and crape fell on Mabel's neck, embracing her so warmly as to astonish

her, prepared as she was to be affectionate.

“How do you do?” said the young man, coming into the hall and catching Mabel’s eye over his sister’s head, which was reclining on her friend’s shoulder.

Mabel’s eyes twinkled with irrepressible humour as she noted the impatient look he gave his effusive sister’s back. Almost as if she had felt his displeasure, Connie straightened herself, and with a little assumption of dignity, which very nearly made Mabel laugh outright, said—

“Have you paid the cabman, Hubert?”

“That’s all right, Miss Constance,” said Robson abruptly, coming up laden with shawls; while a dull flush mounted to Hubert’s forehead as he reflected that, it being nearly quarter day, his funds were low, and that the sum of half a

crown, at present residing in solitary grandeur in his waistcoat-pocket, would hardly have sufficed to pay the long cab-fare from the station.

Only Mabel saw, and thought she understood. Constance, after a weary look round the little hall, said plaintively—

“ Shall we go upstairs ? ”

“ Yes,” said Mabel ; and Constance instantly slipped her arm round her waist.

Mabel yielded to the embrace. But as they went upstairs, which they were forced to do crab-fashion, owing to narrowness of space and Constance’s affection, she looked back, and said kindly to Hubert—

“ Won’t you come up and have a cup of tea ? ”

Hubert, after a dubious glance at his

muddy boots, assented, and followed the girls up to the drawing-room, where they found Mr. and Mrs. Chesham; the latter all nervous flutter and smiles, and the former in a condition of outraged virtue at having to receive a "lodger."

Constance instantly suffered herself to be cooed over and caressed by Mrs. Chesham in a manner which would have driven Mabel herself distracted, but which was exactly what gentle, clinging Connie had always longed for. Mr. Chesham, after standing on the hearthrug in as aggressive a position as he could possibly assume, intended to be significant of the fact that he was a gentleman, and not in the least responsible for any vagaries of his wife's and step-daughter's, walked solemnly out of the room without bestowing a glance upon Hubert, whom he

understood to be exceedingly poor, and therefore a fit subject for insult.

Mabel gave the young man a cup of tea and a kind look, which called up a brighter expression upon his own somewhat pale and worn face.

“Are you working very hard just now?” she asked, sitting down near him.

“Not very,” he answered rather dejectedly. “I have the studio full of things already.”

“Are you going to exhibit this year?”

“I am going to send in, if that’s what you mean,” he returned almost rudely. “Of course I shall have the pleasure of seeing my work back again before long.”

Mabel was silent for a moment; then she said softly—

“Do you know, I am very sorry to see you like this. It is not like you. You

are generally so brave—and—you are so young.”

Hubert turned his head away, and seemed to be intently studying the pattern of the carpet. Then he suddenly looked straight at her and said—

“Yes; I am ashamed of myself for speaking like that. Somehow, I always manage to say something you don't like. You see”—with a shamefaced little laugh—“you are so sympathetic; one never thinks of saying the conventional thing to you.”

“I don't want you——” began Mabel eagerly; when Connie's voice broke in—

“Oh, Mabel, do persuade Hubert to let us come and see his studio. I have always so longed to see one; and what's the good of having an artist brother if one can't profit by his studio?”

Mabel, who had a shrewd idea about Hubert's studio, looked at him without speaking; but, rather to her surprise, he agreed at once, and fixed an afternoon in the following week for them to come.

Mabel got no word with him alone after that; but before he went away he gave her a look, and a warm clasp of the hand, which seemed to thank her for the comfort she wanted, but thought she had not been able, to give him.





CHAPTER II.

AN INVITATION.

“COME in.”

Hubert Durant uttered the words somewhat impatiently, without turning his head round from his work, as if the intruder, whoever he might be, could have no interest for him.

When the door had opened and closed gently, however, he did condescend to cast a glance behind him, and, with an exclamation of surprise, flung down his palette and brushes, and turned to greet his visitor, a man quite twenty years his senior.

“I beg your pardon. I had no idea it was you,” he said, with a somewhat nervous look towards his easel.

“Hard at work?” observed the newcomer in a deep voice—a voice which women were wont to characterize as “beautiful.”

“Yes—an order, for once in a way!” said Hubert, with a contemptuous laugh.

“Copy of a portrait—family picture, I suppose?”

“Exactly. Isn’t it astonishing that any one should want a duplicate of such a monstrosity!”

“H’m, h’m!” said his visitor vaguely; and then, turning away from the easel and scrutinizing the studio with eyes which seemed to have the power of observing everything at once, he continued, “What I wanted was the address of young Walker.

You remember, you said the other evening you would send it me ; but as I was passing your door I thought I would look in and save you the trouble."

Hubert went to his desk and began rummaging among a hopeless-looking mass of papers, while Stephen Baring, Royal Academician, threw himself into the only arm-chair, with the remark, "No objection to smoke, I suppose?"

Hubert happened to have a particular objection that afternoon ; but reflecting that it was early yet, and that he could open the window after his visitor had gone, he replied in the negative, and Mr. Baring, producing a very black pipe from his pocket, proceeded to light it.

As he sat there, with one leg lazily thrown over the arm of the chair, he made a decidedly impressive picture.

Stephen Baring was a man whom it would have been impossible to overlook in a room full of people. There was something about him which arrested the eye at once, and made one ask, "Who is that?" He had no special beauty of feature to recommend him, although there were women, and plenty of them, who thought his high, rather narrow forehead, finely chiselled nose, large melancholy dark-brown eyes, and his jet-black hair and short pointed beard, worthy of an Apollo, if not of Jove himself. His mouth was hidden beneath a thick moustache, but he had a trick of often putting up his hand to it as if to conceal its expression. It was, perhaps, the lofty carriage of his head, and a peculiar look of intensity in his eyes, which commanded attention. There was about him the quiet dignity of power, the

presence of genius which felt and understood itself.

“ You young men allow yourselves luxuries ! ” he said presently, in a half-quizzical tone.

“ Luxuries ! ” repeated Hubert, wondering if his distinguished visitor were making game of him.

“ Flowers—and tea ! ” went on Baring, waving his pipe towards a bunch of late roses and a daintily arranged tea-tray which decorated the rickety table.

“ Oh, those ! ” said Hubert. “ I am expecting—my sister.”

Baring puffed at his pipe and said carelessly, “ Didn't know you had a sister.”

Hubert told him a little about Constance, and the circumstances under which she had come to London ; to all of which the artist listened or appeared to listen atten-

tively. The narrative was scarcely ended when there were steps outside, and a hesitating knock at the door.

“Already!” exclaimed Hubert, looking ruefully at the wreaths of smoke which circled around his visitor’s head.

“May we come in?” asked Constance’s childish voice.

Hubert promptly sprang to open the door, and his sister, Mabel, and Mrs. Chesham, appeared.

There was a gentle exclamation of “By Jove!” and the next moment Mr. Baring was being introduced to the three ladies.

Constance was slightly disconcerted at first at the sight of a stranger, but soon recovered herself, and went trotting about the room, keeping up a little babble of wondering remarks.

“What a funny place! Are all studios

like this? So small, and stuffy, and—and—smoky! Where are the armour, and tapestry, and all the other things there always are in studios that one reads about?"

"You must get Mr. Baring to invite you to his studio if you want to see a really beautiful one," said Hubert; while Mabel looked round the shabby room, which, with its attempt at order and comfort, almost brought the tears to her eyes.

Constance came across to Mr. Baring, and looked at him pathetically. "Will you invite us to your studio?" she said.

"My dear child!" exclaimed Mrs. Chesham.

Mabel and Hubert laughed outright.

But Mr. Baring replied in his deep tones, "With the very greatest pleasure."

"Constance's brother mustn't be thin-

skinned!" observed Hubert aside to Mabel, who replied—

"No, indeed. But she is only a child, you know; she has not the least idea that anything she says is not kind."

Hubert smiled.

"Oh, I never think of blaming her. Connie has always had *carte blanche* to walk roughshod over my feelings. It is wonderful, though, how heavily those pretty little feet of hers can tread sometimes."

"She has been out so little, too. Everything seems strange to her, and she is very excitable."

"She always was," replied Hubert. "As a child she used to go into a perfect fever whenever she had set her heart on a thing. I believe she used generally to get all she wanted, because Robson said

she would be ill if she didn't have her own way."

"Robson seems immensely attached to her."

"She is. I am sure she would do anything for Connie. As it is, I expect Connie owes her her life two or three times over. Robson nursed her through all her illnesses with the most utter devotion."

"Hubert," here called Mrs. Chesham, "the kettle is boiling, but I see no tea-caddy."

"He probably forgets ever to put any tea in the teapot, and drinks hot water under the impression that tea is not what it used to be," said Constance saucily.

Hubert produced the tea-caddy promptly, however, and Mrs. Chesham made the tea, talking to him the while in her soft, rather

monotonous way. Mabel's mother had been quite enjoying herself during the last few days. Now that she had undertaken to chaperon Constance, she had perforce spent more time out of Mr. Chesham's study, or sick-room, as he himself preferred to call it, than she had done for years past, and the change was doing her good. There was a kind of guilty pleasure in being so amused and interested away from George, which served to give extra zest to the enjoyment of what she feared would soon have to come to an end.

George was already getting injured and fractious, and his wife expected him every day to put his veto on her new manner of life. She tried to make up for her absences by extra attention to his little fads and fancies. He had not needed to speak twice about his newspaper. He could read

it all day and all night now if he chose. As a matter of fact, he had never been observed to take it up after ten o'clock in the morning, an hour before that at which the paper-boy who had so weighed on his mind had been wont to come. The three-volume novels which he considered a necessity of his existence were provided in stacks; his cigars had become of an even superior quality; and he was at liberty to try every patent medicine and lozenge advertised. By these cunning measures Mrs. Chesham hoped to allay, or at least defer, the explosion which her experience of her lord told her was inevitable, and which, she feebly felt, would carry all before it, as it had done so many times already. While her holiday lasted, however, she meant to enjoy it to the utmost, and threw herself into all the girls' plans

as eagerly as if she had been twenty years old again.

Mabel was glad to see her mother so cheered and bright. It was many years since she had heard her laugh as merrily as she often laughed now. It was Constance who had effected this welcome change, and Constance became, therefore, of supreme importance in Mabel's eyes. She, and Robson no less, must be made to feel thoroughly comfortable, and to this end Mabel worked with all her might. She had quickly conquered Robson, who knew a "nice young lady" when she saw one. Constance had been fond of her before, and, though perhaps just a little bit afraid of her, was still fonder now; and Mabel, for the above and other reasons besides, would have patiently borne with twice Connie's lightness and unconscious selfishness. She

took a sort of motherly pride in the girl's innocent loveliness, feeling an immense pity for her lonely condition, a condition for which Constance, of all people, was so eminently unfit.

Connie did indeed look exquisitely pretty, as she sat toying with her tea—a faint bloom of excitement on her delicately-rounded cheek, her childish forget-me-not eyes shining, and her rosy mouth chattering away as hard as it would go, uttering a wonderful mixture of sense and nonsense, which all sounded very sparkling and amusing somehow, and could certainly be listened to without any effort.

And yet, although her beauty seemed to light up the whole room, and was enough to attract any artist's admiration, it was not upon her that Stephen Baring's eyes were fixed. He stood upon the hearthrug,

listening ostensibly to Connie's babble, even putting in a word or two now and then; but his gaze was rivetted on Mabel's face, and had been so ever since she had entered the room.

Painters are privileged people—painters who have made their way, at least. A beautiful woman's face is not her own property, in their opinion. If it were possible, they would exact the rendering up of each such face as sternly as ever Shylock demanded his pound of flesh. Beautiful lines and tints belong to an artist by right—they are the things that are Cæsar's. In olden times painters sued humbly at a lady's knee the favour of immortalizing her features; in modern days the lady knows no peace until she has persuaded the artist to “let her sit.”

Mr. Baring was accustomed to this latter

proceeding. He had been positively deluged, since he became famous, by letters from women asking to be allowed to sit for his next picture, modestly stating that they were considered the very image of his last Madonna. Mothers continually brought their daughters to the studio—girls who rolled their eyes and tousled their hair for the artist's benefit, hoping that he would confer notoriety upon them by giving them at least a corner in some large composition. Mr. Baring had no lack of models; there was always a string of damsels of many degrees of rank and standing who were more than ready to sit quieter under his intent eyes than they had ever done in their lives before.

This sort of thing spoils a man; it blunts his sense of the bloom and delicacy of womanhood, and, especially if he have

no very keen sense of chivalry to start with, causes him to look upon the whole sex as one vast slave-market from which he has only to choose.

Mr. Baring adored his art; he worshipped a beautiful face as one of the principal accessories to that art; he felt the keenest, most enraptured delight at the sight of the lovely curves and soft lights and shadows that go to make up a woman's beauty; he longed, with a desire almost painful in its intensity, to transfer them to his canvas, to make them his, to see them grow and stand out in even still greater perfection of form, the work of that hand whose creative power seemed sometimes nearly super-human.

So, as Mabel's beauty happened to be of exactly the kind which most fascinated the artist, he made no scruple of feasting

his eyes upon it, serenely indifferent whether his steady gaze might be acceptable to its recipient or not.

Meanwhile Mabel herself, careless both of the chatter of the others and of Mr. Baring's scrutiny, had gone off into a brown study. This was a very common habit of hers, and one which her stepfather was never tired of condemning as ill-bred and selfish. The delinquent herself was fully alive to its enormity, and had made really sincere efforts to break herself of it, but as yet without much success.

When Hubert had gone over to Mrs. Chesham's side, Mabel's attention had first been caught by the half-finished canvas on the easel, at which he had been working when interrupted by Baring. It was, as he had told his visitor, a copy of a

family portrait. The original stood close by, and, although every allowance for age and dirt were made, contrasted but unfavourably with the copy. It was a dull, uninteresting face enough; but it was beginning to stand, in all its uncompromising plainness, well out from the background, and, uncongenial work though it must have been, there was no trace of hurry or of carelessness in the execution.

“I am sure — certain that he has genius!” Mabel thought, “if only he will have the courage and patience that is a part of genius. Why will he be so impatient, and expect to succeed at once? Other men have had to struggle up. There is Mr. Baring himself, who, they say, very nearly starved when he was quite a young man, and look where he is now.”

Involuntarily her reflections led her to

glance at Mr. Baring, and she met his direct gaze with a suddenness which seemed to send a little shock through her. Although hitherto she had known him only by his work and his reputation, he had always been rather a hero to her. His name was constantly in the mouths of her fellow art-students, his pictures had long been a source of wonderment and delight to her; and now that she met him in the flesh, his appearance interested and attracted her. She felt that she was in the presence of a master-mind, and, as had always been a little her way from childhood, was inclined to fall down and worship.

Baring crossed over to where she was sitting as soon as she had looked at him. He was all eagerness now to get her to sit to him.

“Are you fond of pictures?” he asked, as a beginning.

“Miss Moore paints very well herself,” here put in Hubert, as he brought Mabel a cup of tea.

“Oh no, indeed!” said Mabel hurriedly, blushing up to the roots of her hair.

Mr. Baring’s lip curled a little beneath his moustache. He was rather tired of hearing about women’s painting.

“Then you are one of us?” he said, with a little laugh.

“It is absurd to mention my work at all,” said Mabel earnestly. “I should like to paint well, but I have had very little opportunity for study. Don’t you think Mr. Durant’s work very promising?” she added, anxious to turn the conversation, and desirous of eliciting an opinion from so eminent a judge.

“H’m!” answered Baring, with a careless glance at the easel. “Yes; not bad—not bad at all. He may do decently in about twenty years’ time.”

“*Twenty* years!” repeated Mabel, aghast.

Baring was watching every change of expression as it flitted across her mobile features. He kept his eyes fixed on her face as he replied—

“I consider that it takes quite twenty years to make an artist. But if you think that such a very enormous time, we will say fifteen.”

“And he is so impatient already!” Mabel said, half to herself.

“Ah, yes; I dare say!” answered Baring, with another of his deep mirthless laughs. “That is what all these young fellows are. They want to begin where we leave off.”

“But you——” said Mabel, with a swift look at him, but broke off with another blush.

“You were going to say I didn’t wait twenty years! You are mistaken. I began at sixteen—I am forty-three now, and my name has been practically made only since the last five or six years. All the rest of the time I worked without much encouragement.”

“It must have been very difficult to persevere sometimes,” said Mabel softly.

Baring’s eyes kindled.

“I could have done nothing else,” he said, and waited a moment; then added abruptly, “Will you do me a favour, Miss Moore?”

Mabel raised her eyes to his questioningly.

“I want you to sit to me—will you?”

The eyes fell at once; but after a minute they looked up again, and Mabel said simply—

“I shall be very pleased to—if mother does not object.”

“Oh, she won’t object,” said Mr. Baring easily, thinking of the many mothers who would have jumped at such a proposal.

Mabel drew her eyebrows together with a quick little frown. Mr. Baring took too much for granted, even for a genius.

“I don’t know; I will ask her,” she said, the least bit stiffly.

Mr. Baring felt he had offended; how, he had no idea.

“I thought young ladies did as they pleased nowadays, and never asked their mothers anything,” he remarked.

The line between Mabel’s eyebrows grew

more marked. Mr. Baring wondered what on earth he could have said to make the girl cross. Somewhat to the relief of both of them, Mrs. Chesham got up to go. George and his dinner-pill were on her mind.

Connie came fluttering over to Mabel with a "Good-bye, Mr. Baring. Mind you don't forget about our visit to *your* studio!"

"I am going too," said Mr. Baring. "Do you live near here?"

"Not very far," replied Connie. "We can all go together. Hubert is coming to dine with us, and be sociable for once in a way."

Mr. Baring wished they would ask him to dinner too; but although Connie looked imploringly at Mrs. Chesham, the latter did not appear to understand, and went down-

stairs, escorted by Hubert, Mabel following close behind.

When they reached the street, Hubert and Mabel went one to either side of Mrs. Chesham, and Connie walked on just in front with Mr. Baring.

“I believe you are staying with Mrs. Chesham?” said the artist.

“Yes, I live with them. I have only just come,” answered Connie, perfectly ready to be communicative. “I used to live with my aunt, in the country. So did Hubert; only he was silly enough to go and insist upon becoming a ridiculous artist. Oh, I beg your pardon; I forgot you painted too. But really it was absurd of him. And then Aunt Sarah died, and, wicked old thing! left me twenty thousand pounds, and Hubert just a pitiful hundred a year. Wasn't it horrid of her?”

“To leave you twenty thousand pounds?” asked Mr. Baring, with a smile, looking down with fresh interest at the lovely face beside him.

“No, of course not!” Connie answered, with her light ripple of laughter; “but to leave Hubert nothing to speak of.”

“I should have been very glad of a hundred a year at his age,” Mr. Baring said grimly.

“Oh, I dare say; but then perhaps you——” Connie stopped.

“Were not brought up to a dress-coat and six-inch high collar!” finished Mr. Baring. “No, I wasn’t.”

“I wasn’t going to say that!” cried Connie, indignantly. “No one can say that Hubert makes himself ridiculous like that!”

“I never said he did—but I think he

ought to be very grateful that he has anything to depend upon at all. And now let us arrange about your visit to me. When would you best like to come?"

"I don't know. Any day that will suit you and Mrs. Chesham."

"Shall we say Friday, then? And when you have once seen the studio, I hope you will come very often."

"Oh, thank you!" murmured Constance.

"People like you were meant to inhabit studios," said Mr. Baring.

"Like me? Why?" asked Connie, naïvely.

"Because—because you are just what an artist likes to look at."

"Oh!"

"Yes—has no artist ever asked you to sit to him?"

"I don't know any artists—any real

artists," said Connie; "for, of course, I don't count Hubert. I have sat to him lots of times, and very dull and tiresome I found it."

"I am sorry you don't like sitting."

"Not to Hubert. But then one's brother is always tiresome — don't you think so?"

"Would you mind sitting to me?" asked Mr. Baring.

Constance's sapphire eyes met his with a delighted look in them.

"To you? Oh no, of course not! Do you mean you will really put me in a picture? A picture that will be exhibited?"

"A real picture that will really be exhibited," answered the artist, passing his hand over his moustache.

"Oh, what fun! Wait; I must tell the others!" And before her companion had

time to utter a word, she had turned back and was announcing joyfully—

“Just think! Mr. Baring has asked me to sit to him! And he is going to put poor little Me into a real picture!”

Her three elders received the news each in a different way. Hubert was pleased that Mr. Baring should admire his sister; Mrs. Chesham wondered nervously whether George would quite approve; and Mabel nearly laughed as she saw Connie's looks of delight, and reflected how very unlike her friend's her own reception of a similar honour had been.

As Mr. Baring shook hands with her a minute later, he looked straight into her eyes with a gleam of cynical amusement in his own. He thought that she was really as eager to sit as Connie, and that, by asking Connie, and taking no

further notice of her, he would arouse a feeling of pique, which would soon bring her to do as he asked. Mr. Baring was a very clever artist, but one needs to be something more before one can read correctly the signs of a woman's face.





CHAPTER III.

CONTRASTS.

AFTER saying good-bye to Mrs. Chesham, and fixing the Friday following for her visit to the studio with the girls, Mr. Baring made his way quietly home. It was a somewhat long distance to his house, but he was a capital walker, and preferred his own feet to any more costly mode of travelling. His house, built by himself within the last six years of his prosperity, stood in a fashionable quarter for artists, and was one of the handsomest among many handsome others. Its walls were

of the true old red brick, which seems to have so completely given way, in these latter days, to a much brighter and less restful colour. Mr. Baring had taken immense trouble to procure these dark-red bricks, which were the envy of his neighbours and the delight of his own eye. Nor did the inside of the walls belie the comfortable look of their exterior. Everything that modern art and skill, combined with an instinctive sense of fitness, could furnish forth, was there. The house was a show place, and had done no little for its master's reputation and popularity. Nothing succeeds like success; and since Mr. Baring, by dint of sheer hard work and real genius, had pushed his way to the front, he had become a very great personage indeed.

It came to be the fashion for "every one

who was anybody" to sit to Mr. Baring. It was "the thing" to have a Baring—a brevet mark of wealth and discrimination. The longer prices the Academician asked, the more eager people were to pay them. Rich merchants, not to be outdone by their betters, brought all the glories of their smug shaven faces and protuberant waistcoats, their homely wives, and simpering daughters, to be painted by Baring. Bishops in their lawn; scarred veterans; popular actors and actresses—all thronged to the studio, ready to pay for the idealizing of their countenances sums that they would have grudged for any other purpose in the world.

Among the softer half of these visitors were many who would only too willingly have taken up their abode for good in the red-brick house. It was a thousand pities,

every one agreed, that Mr. Baring did not marry. His house was no doubt exceedingly pretty and most artistic, but still it lacked those last touches which only feminine fingers can give. Several mammas had confided to Mr. Baring—in the very strictest secrecy, of course—that their daughters were intended by nature for an artist's wife; one Lady Mary was even supposed to have intimated to him that she herself was ready to look with favourable eyes upon him; but Mr. Baring remained imperturbably indifferent to hints and proposals alike. A wife is an expensive luxury in modern times, and Mr. Baring was frugal in his tastes.

So no light footstep tripped over the mosaic paved hall to meet him as he put his latch-key in the door. A footstep, very much the reverse of light,

belonging to an old lady of particularly unprepossessing exterior, approached from a side door, and a voice, which resembled nothing so much as the creaking of a long unoiled hinge, inquired whether he would have supper up.

“Yes; and look sharp too, for I’m hungry,” replied Baring, drawing off his boots, and taking a pair of old slippers, very much trodden down at heel, from a thirteenth-century cabinet which stood on one side of the square hall.

“You hadn’t need to be, for you ate a good dinner enough!” grumbled the old dame as she turned away.

“So I did,” muttered Baring, pushing open his studio door, and going in to give a paternal look at the work he had been doing before he went out.

He was painting a Saint Cecilia for

a Roman Catholic chapel belonging to some great people; the picture was less than half finished, but already bore evidences of the master-hand to which it would presently owe a beautiful existence. There was a certain mystic beauty about the saintly maiden's face, raised heavenward, as her fingers wandered over the keys of the organ at which she was sitting; her rapt, dreamy eyes looking as though they had caught a glimpse of the spirit-world which opens ever at the sound of music. Above and behind the player's head, hovered the ethereal forms of little angels, lured from their perfect bliss by strains even more exquisite than those of heavenly choirs.

The painter gazed long and scrutinizingly at his work. He had no critic so uncompromisingly severe as himself.

The old lady made her unlovely apparition at the door, and had to speak twice before she could rouse his attention. Then, carefully turning down the sun-burner, which lighted his studio with a brilliancy almost, if not quite, equal to daylight, he followed her into the dining-room, a large apartment, furnished in sumptuous but good taste, and lighted by one solitary candle.

Here, on a coarse and crumpled cloth, spread over one end of the beautifully carved oak table, was displayed a meagre meal—a scraggy bone, a piece of stony-looking cheese, a half-cut loaf of antediluvian appearance, and a common jug holding a pint of beer. The knives and forks were bent and old; the salt-cellar was cracked, and contained but a pinch of dingy-looking salt; and the tumblers

by the side of the plates were of the very commonest glass. Altogether, hardly a meal for the prince of painters, as Mr. Baring had been designated by a friendly critic only a day or two before.

The artist himself, however, did not appear to find anything amiss. He sat down, and began searching the scraggy bone with a perseverance worthy of a better cause, while the old woman took her seat at one side of the table, and made a running comment on his occupation.

“There—a little more to the right, now! There’s a lovely bit, fit for a king! What a shame that butchers’ meat should be so dear, when men must eat so much of it! Now, I can go from morning till night with nothing but bread-and-cheese and a drop of tea.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Baring, with a chuckle;

“it was a good day for my pocket when you came to live with me—eh, old girl?”

“Ah!” returned the old woman proudly, with a complacent glance at the table, “you wouldn’t have got a fashionable wife to do for you as well as your own mother’s sister, would you?”

“No, indeed,” said Baring, labouring at the ancient loaf with a very blunt knife. “I don’t know what I should do without you, Aunt Bridget.”

It was evidently not from the female side of the house that Mr. Baring had inherited his distinguished looks. Old Mrs. Simes was about as ugly as an old woman can be; the ugliness of her soul was stamped upon every one of the features which even a kindly heart could hardly have rendered less than plain. She was dressed in a faded and rusty black

gown, and looked more like a char-woman than the presiding goddess of her nephew's lovely house.

She refused to share the scrapings of the mutton-bone, contenting herself with a very meagre helping of bread-and-cheese, which she consumed ruminatively, making each mouthful a sort of event in itself, and apparently endeavouring to ascertain how small a crumb of cheese could be induced to taste through a piece of bread ten or twelve times its superior in size.

Very little conversation passed between the artist and his aunt. Each seemed absorbed in thought. Baring was thinking of his Saint Cecilia, and the dry meat which he mechanically put into his mouth might have been the most dainty of food, for aught he knew. Somehow his Cecilia had taken to herself a new face,

however—a face with far more piquant features than saints are usually allowed to possess. The altering of a line here and there, though, would soon put that to rights; the outline a little more oval, the eyes more pensive, the mouth not turned up quite so much at the corners. What a different face from Maria's, the Italian model from whom he had been painting his Cecilia, and who, although she was the best he could get, was very far from satisfactory. It was difficult to get Maria to pose for a saint; her features were ordinary, and her eyes and mouth eminently stupid. He had done wonders with her, and in the morning had gone out fairly satisfied with his work; but now that other face had come to haunt him, and the thought of Maria filled him with disgust.

He finished his meal quickly and returned to the studio, where he spent an hour in fruitlessly endeavouring to reproduce Mabel's face. Fruitlessly; for, great painter though he was, he could not draw from memory. He could idealize, but he could not draw his ideal. He gave up the attempt at last in despair, and sat before his picture, gloomily gazing at it, and contrasting the face, which to most people would have seemed perfect enough, with that one which his artist's imagination invested with a beauty far transcending any which had been bestowed upon it by Nature. The longer he thought of it, the more lovely it became, until his hunger to see it again, to *create* it himself, grew almost insupportable. He pushed back his chair and walked up and down the long studio, his eyes burning with a

strange feverish light, his hands clasped tight behind his back.

Old Mrs. Simes had been in bed and asleep for hours; the one hard-worked servant had almost begun to wake to the consciousness that it was time to get up again, before Mr. Baring went to his room. The expression on his features as he slowly mounted the stairs might have been that of some general to whom the morrow would bring a great battle which he *meant* to win—the head thrown back, the eyes full of concentrated energy and will, the mouth set and firm. The fever of his dream had burned itself out, the indomitable resolution and purpose of his genius remained.

Mr. Baring's was not the only studio haunted by Mabel's face that night. About the same time that the fashionable

artist sat in despair before his unsatisfactory Saint Cecilia, Hubert Durant placed himself, pencil in hand, before his easel. He shut his eyes for a few moments, during which the lines of his somewhat stern young face seemed to soften and relax. Then, with a few rapid and sure touches, he accomplished what Stephen Baring would have given a great deal to be able to do. From the canvas sprang forth Mabel Moore's face—her living, human face, with no etherealized saint's expression on it, but with her own inimitable look, in which tender, deep feeling, fun, capability of satire, strength of will, and womanly gentleness, all combined to form a whole in which perfection of feature gave way to beauty of expression. The owner of that face would not pass through life leaving no

trace to mark her footsteps; she would exercise some influence on those about her, would perhaps give more than it would ever be her lot to receive, would inspire rather than achieve, but strong and good she would be always. No saint with taper, bloodless fingers, sluggishly beating heart purified, for its own selfish sake, of all earthly affections, with insipid, perfect features awaking only at the strains of heavenly music, but a living flesh and blood woman, with strength to rule herself, and to fight for those dear to her.

Hubert made the eyes of the woman he loved look straight into his, instead of directing their gaze upward. So they *had* looked into his, with frank and solicitous affection, only that afternoon. No word of love had ever passed between the two, but each knew that the other loved and

was beloved. The time had not come yet for speech; the man would have been ashamed to offer nothing but his heart, and the girl's lips were closed by reason of her sex. But Hubert, in his better moments, such as these, when his good angel came to chase away the gloom that so often surrounded him, knew that he was master of Mabel's life and soul, and that it depended upon him alone, not to win her—that was done—but to show himself worthy of his prize, so that he might claim it and wear it close to his heart for ever.





CHAPTER IV.

IN THE STUDIO.

CONSTANCE found living in London very much more to her taste than her former life had been. She had always been bored and dissatisfied in the country. Green fields and trees were dumb to her, or only spoke of monotony and dulness. She hated long walks, disliked getting her boots dirty, was frightened of insects, cared little for lawn-tennis, and, above all, detested visiting the poor. Perhaps Miss Durant, whose mind had always been wrapped up in Hubert, his requirements,

and his perfections, had not given as much thought as she might to make the girl's existence a really happy one. She herself had so many tastes and occupations, all essentially belonging to a country life, that it never occurred to her that any one could want more than Constance already had. She had no idea that her niece felt aggrieved as each spring came round, and the London season's doings and sayings took up the greater part of the newspapers. *She* had never yearned to leave her lovely country home, just when it was in full beauty, for a stuffy town house, with endless balls, dinner-parties, and theatre-going in perspective. Hubert had never asked for a season in London—why should Connie?

Constance was not on sufficiently cordial terms with her aunt to confide to her her

aspirations and longings, but this fact did not prevent their existence. She was born to be a town, not a country mouse ; and when at last her dream came true, and she might live in London all the year round, if she chose, she was almost beside herself with joy.

True, she was obliged to content herself with society not quite up to the level of her country dreams. The Cheshams had not been well off enough to have much acquaintance among the people whose names figure conspicuously in the society papers ; their friends belonged mostly to the literary and artistic world. Constance was not really socially ambitious, however ; she found Mabel's friends very much more amusing than the members of the county families who had exchanged stiff periodical visits with Miss Durant. She, as well

as Hubert, had probably inherited a little of the Bohemian blood which had proved so disastrous to her father, and the source of which had been such an unsolvable problem to old Miss Durant. So, as she was not difficult to please, she found plenty of amusement, and received attention enough to gratify even her vanity; for twenty thousand pounds are magnetic, especially when coupled with such a pretty face as Connie's.

Mrs. Chesham, who had secretly been exceedingly anxious lest George should find the presence of the stranger within his gates more than his sensitive nerves could bear, was now relieved of her apprehensions. George was not only long-suffering — he was positively amiable. Whether it was the lustre of her wealth which lent an additional glow to Connie's

already golden hair, or the helplessness of her forlorn, orphaned condition that appealed to his heart, one thing was soon evident—George was able to see in Miss Durant all those perfections the absence of which he had so often, and so audibly, regretted in his step-daughter.

Constance possessed all the feminine softness of manner which, when exhibited in a woman not a man's own wife or daughter, appeals so strongly to his chivalrous feeling. *She* never seemed to think that her own judgment on all sorts of matters was likely to be every whit as good as, if not superior to, his masculine and, therefore, naturally weightier and more clear-headed opinion; nor, at the same time, did she ever appear to consider that a Man was a species of hardy animal, whose back should be strong enough to

bear any burden, and who should be always attending to other people, while excluded from any kind of consideration himself. *She* never sat for twenty minutes, apparently giving that careful attention to a few remarks on indigestion, or weak nerves, which a sufferer like himself might be supposed to claim as a natural right, and then started up with some absurd remark which clearly proved that his discourse might as well have been addressed to empty air. Constance was never brusque; *her* upper lip never exhibited a disagreeable tendency to curl upwards at the corners; *she* was never enthusiastic, as *some* people called their noisy ill-breeding; *she* did not pretend to any accomplishments; she was what he had always longed to see his step-daughter—a simple, affectionate, gentle English maiden.

The comparisons which, with his usual delicacy of feeling where others were concerned, he did not fail to draw, hurt little Mrs. Chesham, accustomed as she was to hear her beloved daughter continually decried; but Mabel herself only laughed at them. She knew her step-father thoroughly, and now that she had attained to years of comparative discretion and independence, could afford to see the humorous side of his complaints, so long as they were directed against herself, and not against her mother.

Connie's advent had brought too much ease of purse, and consequently of mind, to Mabel's mother for Mabel to become jealous of her, even had there been the least room for so contemptible a feeling in Mabel's mind. To watch the lines relax which years of large bills and scanty

means had brought upon her mother's forehead and about her mouth; to note the absence of the nervous start at each ring at the front door, which might mean a fresh bill or an importunate creditor; to see her mother, at sight of whose cares and martyrdom she had writhed in such ineffectual and bitter anger, getting back some of her old lightness of heart, almost blossoming out into a second spring;—for these things Mabel would have endured much, a very great deal more than any petty annoyance Mr. Chesham's puerile cackling could inflict.

She cherished Constance, for these reasons, as the apple of her eye, doing all she could possibly think of or invent to make the house and her new life pleasant to her. When her step-father, irritated at his wife's going out so often with the two

girls, interfered, and insisted that she should attend to her "home duties," Mabel, in a fright lest Constance should find staying in the house dull, persuaded her mother that they could quite well go out together without any *chaperon*.

"I know girls didn't do it when you were young, mother," she said in answer to Mrs. Chesham's feeble expostulations. "But all that is changed now; and, besides, I look much older than Constance, and quite staid and steady. I'll wear blue spectacles, and a poke bonnet, and long cotton gloves, if you like; but don't stop Connie's going out, for it's just all she lives for."

Mrs. Chesham sighed, but gave way as usual; and the girls went about together, after the fashion of sensible young women nowadays, who do a great many things

their grandmothers would have screamed at, although those estimable ladies, if we are to believe—not their own, but other people's records—were scarcely as perfect as they would have us suppose.

Mabel's mother had, however, apart from her own great wish to see Mr. Baring's studio, a very strong feeling that it would not be "proper" for the girls to go there unescorted; and when the Friday for which their visit had been fixed arrived, she communicated her opinion on the subject to her daughter.

"Yes, but he'll never let you come," said Mabel, blankly.

"If we could contrive to make him very, very comfortable," suggested Mrs. Chesham, wistfully, "he might feel able to spare me."

"Let me manage it, mother; I'm sure I can."

Mabel spent the morning in ordering a luncheon peculiarly destined to appeal to the invalid's gastronomic tastes, and in going to the library, there to pick out and bring home an enticing looking volume of a highly sensational type. She cautioned her mother, so that Mrs. Chesham might not, as she had often before done, counteract all her diplomacy through ignorance of its intention; and having thus, like an arch-conspirator, laid her train, she came down to luncheon with the most innocent face possible.

Mr. Chesham dragged himself into the dining-room with a portentous frown upon his massive brow, and seated himself in gloomy silence. His features somewhat relaxed, however, at the sight of the stuffed tomatoes which his soul loved, and presently, under the influence of partridge

and Connie's most bewitching manner—that young lady being in a particularly good humour, as she was looking forward to a pleasant afternoon—he not only frowned no more, but became positively cheerful.

Mabel was very quiet until luncheon was nearly over, when she said—

“Oh, I changed the books to-day, mother, and I got you that new book of Hyde Gilmore's. I couldn't resist reading a little of it myself, it looks so delightful. Of course it's fearfully sensational. I thought it would amuse you this afternoon while we were out.”

“Thank you, dear,” replied little Mrs. Chesham, tremulously; and only a stern glance from her daughter prevented her saying from force of habit, “Perhaps George would like to see it first.”

Luncheon over, Mr. and Mrs. Chesham retired into the former's study, where Mabel had placed the new book in full view. In about half an hour Mrs. Chesham emerged with a guiltily triumphant face.

Mabel was waiting for her in the dining-room.

"Here you are!" she said, with a low laugh. "What do you say to me now? Am I not a very model of craftiness?"

"My dear," said the little woman, with a half-repentant glance back at the study door, "do you think it seems quite—quite kind to treat him so?"

"Quite kind," said Mabel, stoutly. "All you want is that he should be happy, and we've made him quite so. He has not only the book, but the extra pleasure of having—well, no, I won't say it, if it distresses

you. Come up, dear, and let me make you very tidy."

A little later, they set out for the studio, Mrs. Chesham feeling like a schoolgirl out for a holiday, Connie in a wild state of excitement, and Mabel irrepressibly elated at having secured her mother for the afternoon.

An unkempt servant in a dirty print frock opened the door of Mr. Baring's house, after Mabel had nearly exhausted her strength by pulling at the bell, gazed at the party with an air of astonishment, and finally showed them into a drawing-room of bleak and uninhabited appearance, with the carpet rolled up in the middle of the floor, and odd pieces of stuff covering the chairs.

"How artistic!" exclaimed Mabel, holding up her hands in pretended admiration,

as the door closed noisily on the slatternly maid.

“Oh, hush, my dear!” said Mrs. Chesham, nervously; while Connie stared about, with her blue eyes opened to their fullest extent.

“The exquisite disorder of genius,” went on Mabel, “which never, as is well known, condescends to dustpans or brooms. I hope, though, that when *I* am hung every year on the Academy walls, and only my sex prevents me from being elected President, that I shall still retain my ‘eye’ for a clean face. Did you notice the maid’s face? It was one large, beautiful smut.”

Here the door opened to admit Mrs. Simes, in a costume curiously composed of the skirt of one gown and the body of another.

“How do you do? I am Stephen’s aunt

and housekeeper," she said, genially for her—Mr. Baring having given instructions that these visitors were to be specially well treated. "I am afraid this room is not very comfortable, but there is so much to do in a house like this that it is impossible to get it all done at once. Come into the studio. Stephen lives there, so that too makes it useless to keep the other rooms ready."

They followed her across the hall, to the studio door, which she flung open, remarking, in her high-pitched voice—

"Your visitors, Stephen!" and, shutting it behind them, she retreated to the kitchen to get the tea ready.

Mr. Baring came forward from the end of the long room to greet his guests, which he did in the grave, dignified way peculiar to him. His manner with Mrs. Chesham

was perfect, although it somehow had the effect of making her feel that she was quite, if not more than, a middle-aged woman. His deep-set eyes rested for a moment on Mabel's face, and then turned to Connie, who was almost prancing with anticipation and excitement.

He took them round the studio, showing them curious and beautiful things brought, many of them, by himself from far-distant countries; he produced sketches done in the East, in Spain, and in South America; and finally he halted before the easel on which stood his Saint Cecilia.

Mrs. Chesham gave the picture the appreciative look of a woman who knows nothing about art, and only takes a well-bred interest in it; Connie glanced carelessly at it, and then flitted off to something else; Mabel stood before it, keenly con-

scious of every touch of beauty both in conception and execution.

When she looked away she found the artist watching her, and in answer to the unspoken question in his face—

“It is lovely,” she said gently. “I never saw anything more beautiful.”

Baring’s eyes gave a flash, and then turned to his picture with almost the look that a mother has when she hears her child praised by some one whose opinion she values.

He came a little nearer to Mabel. “If you would only sit to me!” he murmured.

Mabel, with the new feeling of reverence for the great master strong upon her, was just about to express her willingness to do so, when she happened to glance up into his face, and something froze the words upon her lips. What it was she could not

have told. Nothing definite. Mr. Baring was looking at her with just that expression of polite interest which feigns to be a little more anxious than it really is. Why the thought of Hubert should suddenly have come into Mabel's mind she knew not, nor what it was exactly that prompted her next speech.

“Thank you. Indeed, I feel honoured by your asking me; but it is a superstition of mine never to sit to any one.”

Mr. Baring's face darkened. He turned abruptly away without a word, and for the rest of the visit devoted himself exclusively to Connie. Mabel felt that she had offended him, and was very sorry, for he had begun to exercise upon her the kind of fascination of which nearly all women were sensible in his presence. She almost wished he would ask her again, and yet, at the same time,

something told her that she had answered wisely.

She sat down before the picture, and after a minute or two forgot herself in the pleasure which so perfect a piece of art could not fail to arouse in a mind like hers.

“He must be a man of a good and noble nature, or he never could paint a face like that, for there is something in it which he cannot have seen in any earthly model’s features,” she thought.

Presently the untidy maid, with an expression of extreme indignation on her begrimed features, brought in tea, closely followed by Mrs. Simes, whose cheeks were flushed, and whose eyes followed the handmaiden to the door, as though they were loath to lose sight of her.

“Seven spoonfuls of tea for five people!”

she muttered, as she began to bang about the cups and saucers in a way that reminded Mabel of a school feast. "Just because I turned my back for one minute!"

Judging by the quality of the beverage which Mrs. Simes poured out from the Britannia-metal teapot, whose handle, having come off, had been re-attached in an artless manner with a piece of dingy string, she must have rescued at least four of the spoonfuls from a watery grave. The tea was execrable, and served up in a style that would have robbed it of its flavour, even supposing it to have possessed any; but the artist gazed calmly at the tray without appearing to perceive anything amiss, and handed his guests the heavy, common cups as complacently and as carefully as if they had been of the finest Sèvres.

After arranging that Connie should begin her sittings on the following Monday, Mrs. Chesham and the girls took their leave. The door had hardly closed behind them, when the former said—

“My dears, did you ever see anything half so curious? The mixture of gorgeousness and almost squalor! Those cups!”

“Made of the new unbreakable china,” said Mabel, gravely. “I admired them.”

“Oh, Mabel!” cried Connie. “And that awful Mrs. Simes! Why, she’s not a lady!”

“Certainly not,” said Mrs. Chesham, with a little shiver.

“Well, you know,” said Mabel, “one always heard that Mr. Baring was a self-made man. I think it does him all the more credit, and I respect him for not fussing over such trifles as cups and

teapots. He has something better to think of."

"Yes, my dear; but why not combine the two?" insisted little Mrs. Chesham. "He could surely paint quite as well if he made Mrs. Simes buy a new teapot."

"I expect he doesn't even see the string," said Mabel. "Painters' eyes are different from ours."

"It must be very convenient to be a painter," said Mrs. Chesham, dryly; and when she got home she scolded the parlour-maid for bringing up her own immaculate silver teapot with an infinitesimal speck on it.





CHAPTER V.

DAY-DREAMS.

CONSTANCE had been too pleasantly occupied since her arrival in London, to give much thought to her cousin, Harry Lockyer, whose somewhat rare visits to Layton Abbey she had once eagerly looked forward to as the only welcome break in the monotony of her life. Harry was a person of importance in those days; he seemed to bring with him a kind of aroma of that London which dwelt in Connie's mind as the centre of all that was worth living for. And then Harry

was deeply, undisguisedly in love with her, and that in itself was pleasant, all the more because it was the only approach to anything of the sort that she had experienced. She liked him, too, very much ; perhaps better than any one else, not excepting Hubert, in her affection for whom a little not unnatural jealousy was always present.

Harry was rather tiresome occasionally, certainly ; he was always wanting to be grave and in earnest. Several times, when she had complained bitterly of Miss Durant's coldness and severity, he had burst out with an entreaty to her to forsake the house that was no home to her, and to come to him in his almost poverty, and let him love and work for her. As if——! But Harry, for all his sober common sense, was very foolish sometimes.

She had thought that when he had made a name, and was a fashionable West-end physician, in a fair way to knighthood, and with a lucrative practice, she would not very much mind marrying him, but that was—oh, years and years ahead. And meanwhile she didn't want to be bound; she was far too young, and had never enjoyed herself, and Harry was inclined to take strict and prudish views of what a girl might or might not do.

So Harry remained in the distance as a possible Perseus, if no better offered, and Constance fulfilled her daily round without troubling her pretty head as to her cousin's present weal or woe. She had no sympathy whatever with his profession; neither her heart nor her mind cared to follow his.

He had so completely slipped out of

her memory that she was quite startled when, one afternoon, just as it was drawing to the pleasant hour of dusky firelit room and fragrant tea, the parlour-maid announced—

“ Mr. Lockyer.”

“ *Harry!*” cried Constance, springing up from the low armchair in which she had been buried, her feet upon the bar of the fender, lazily watching Mabel in the half-gloom pour out the tea. “ Harry, who would have thought of seeing *you?* ”

The man who received this warm welcome was about thirty, although he looked older. His features were worn and set, he stooped slightly, and his eyes, though keen enough, had a tired, strained look in them.

“ Works too hard,” was Mabel’s com-

ment, as Constance introduced her cousin to her.

“Why have you never come to see me all this time?” said Constance, who, as her conscience slightly smote her, hastened to fasten the blame on some one else.

Harry looked at her. She was just the same. More becomingly dressed, perhaps, her hair more artistically arranged, but the face had not changed. It wore its old expression of innocent openness, which Harry, lover-like, chose to believe was but the smooth surface of deep, as yet untroubled, waters below. Bless her! He was sure it had never once occurred to her sweet, trusting heart, that the money her aunt had left her had raised a barrier between her and her loving, but poor cousin. She could not as yet fathom the depths of a proud man’s character; she

was such a childish, fairy-like creature. If they had been able to marry, he knew — so he thought — that his hand held the master key which would unlock all the treasures of that pure soul—treasures the existence of which he was as certain of as the miner who “knows” that tomorrow, or next day at latest, he will strike gold.

Would she wait for him? He was getting on fairly well; his practice was, if slowly, still steadily increasing; and if certain ideas he had, proved to be worth what he hoped and thought they were, he might make a sudden leap from obscure poverty to reputation and a good income. Should he ask Constance to wait for him? Did she care for him? Unable to make up his mind as to his best course, he had at last resolved to see his darling once

more, and try to glean from her blue eyes the information which night after night of sleepless, anxious thought had been unable to give him.

He answered her question with—

“I didn’t even know your address, until I met Hubert in Bond Street the other day.”

“Dear me! how absurd!” said Connie. “I never even thought of sending it you. Somehow one thinks everybody knows everybody else’s address. But I’ve been here weeks now.”

“And how do you like London after all?” asked Harry, remembering Connie’s longings of old.

“Oh, I think it’s the most dear, delicious, darling place in the world!” cried Connie. “I can’t understand how people can live anywhere else.”

“Wait till you have lived here a few years,” said Mabel; “then you will know how to appreciate the country.”

“*You* prefer the country?” asked Harry, looking scrutinizingly at the girl who had the good fortune to see Connie every day.

“I do—very much,” was all that Mabel said. But her eyes grew soft and wistful, and sought the leaping, dancing flames in the grate, as if she could see in them some picture pleasant to look upon.

Connie gave a laugh.

“You see, Harry, what different tastes we have, Mabel and I. It is the same in everything. She cares for all the things I don’t care about, and I like all the things she doesn’t.”

Mabel smiled. She wondered what Connie *did* care about.

“You ought to get on very well together, then,” said Harry, thinking that Mabel was probably a blue-stocking—a product of modern times, which was the object of his special aversion.

“Oh, we do!” Connie answered somewhat indifferently.

There was a silence. Mabel asked if Harry would have some more tea, and then got up and went away, thinking that the cousins might very probably like to talk by themselves a little.

She went upstairs, where, at the very top of the house, was her own especial refuge—a small room, with a good window and a tiny fireplace. In this room she had played as a child, worked and dreamed as a girl. There was not a corner of it—ordinary, bare, prosaic little place as it looked to outside eyes—which

was not endeared to her by some association. No housemaid was ever allowed to profane it by brush or pail. Mabel kept it clean herself, and was wont to declare that it was the only room in the house that ever was thoroughly free from London dust and dirt.

Mr. Chesham's heavy foot had never—at least, to Mabel's knowledge—ascended the last narrow flight which led to this sanctum. Mrs. Chesham had once or twice sought shelter there, when it had seemed to her that the whole world was becoming one huge George, from whom there was and could be no escape. Then, with that curious reversal of their natural parts which had for many years characterized the relations between this mother and daughter, Mabel had soothed and comforted the elder woman, and had presently

taken her downstairs again, feeling that after all life was not quite intolerable.

It was cold up there after Connie's warm, flower-scented room, but Mabel did not mind that. She lighted the little gas-fire, which Mr. Chesham had always refused to let her have, and for which she had paid at last out of money earned by herself.

She sat down in a very battered old chair—a chair which had held her in all the stages of childhood and girlhood—and began to think. It was very quiet. There was no noise outside, no sound from below, only the slight murmur of the gas-fire was audible in the room.

Hubert had been up here once since Constance had lived with them. Connie had gone into ecstasies over a little picture Mabel had been painting; and, with her

usual impetuosity, had dragged her brother upstairs to see it, without even pausing to ask Mabel's leave. Mabel had followed, half vexed, half pleased.

Hubert had given a curious glance round the room, with its familiar atmosphere of paint, like and yet so unlike his own studio. There were the easels, the tubes of paint, the sheaf of brushes, the turpentine, the palette, the paint-rags—all the indispensable furniture of the artist: but there were also dainty muslin curtains looped back with pale blue, at the window; a little bit of white work, with the needle sticking in it, lay near the palette; a long glove hung over the corner of the second easel; a glass, with a bunch of Neapolitan violets, stood on the chimney-piece. Artist's room, but girl's room as well. It had impressed Hubert more strongly

than if it had been either one or the other; and he had been sensible that evening, in his own studio, which was so unmistakably, so ungracefully masculine, and masculine only, of a great void in his life, which not the most heroic, the most unblenching, devotion to his art could ever fill.

He had stood before Mabel's picture until Constance became impatient, and Mabel painfully conscious of its demerits. Then he had turned away without speaking; but when he said good-bye, half an hour later, he uttered a few words of praise, which Mabel had treasured up in her heart ever since, and which had sent her back to her work with fresh courage.

It was too dark to paint now, even had Mabel not felt lazily inclined. The merry flicker of the gas-fire travelled from one

object to another in the small room—now bringing into relief the easel, making a little girl's face which Mabel had been painting stand out in almost startling distinctness; now showing up the dark red of the ancient table-cover, and revealing a state of confusion upon the table which ought to have put its owner to shame.

One of these sudden glimpses of her canvas brought Mabel's thoughts back from their wanderings to her own work. She wondered vaguely if there were anything really in her—if she would ever attain to anything more than respectable mediocrity. She loved her art; it had consoled and filled her life; it was dear to her for its own sake; she would have wanted to paint if hers had been the only eyes in the world. But had she any spark of the real flame, or was it only a reflection,

which, however bright it might look, would never give forth any original, individual warmth?

It was so difficult for her to work; there were always so many other duties in the way. She could not remain from morning till evening, shut up in her studio, selfishly pursuing her own course, while downstairs her mother missed her, and Connie grew cross and dissatisfied. Less than ever now could she absent herself for many hours together; and yet how, without those long hours, could she ever attain to the technical perfection without which the most beautiful ideas remain lifeless and dumb? Work, and work only, is the Promethean fire which animates the creations of the brain. Mabel knew it, and she knew also that it was impossible for her to work—just now.

Her dreamy thoughts brought before her

a vision of a different and more congenial life, in which she and another seemed to move like two shadows, crossing each other's path, intertwining, blending, each going his own way, each going the same way. She gave no name to that other shadow, did not breathe it even to her own mind, but she knew it—both by name and nature. A long vista of work—real work, each one loving the other's work best; of helpful, inspiring communion; of ambition for each other; and at the very end, far, far away, a sort of throne of glory, on which the one shadow sat, looked up to and renowned throughout the world, while the other shadow, that was herself, sat in the radius of *his* light, each to each the very centre and essence of it all.

And while Mabel sat dreaming, with a happy smile upon her lips, Constance

chattered to Harry of her gaieties, and how tiresome it was to be still in mourning, and of how she was going to sit to Mr. Baring, the Academician.

“He paints so splendidly, you know,” she said, with a funny little critical air.

“How is Hubert getting on?” asked Harry. “I’ve not had time to pay him a visit lately.”

“Oh, I don’t think he gets on at all. The last time we were there he was copying the most hideous old portrait, for which I suppose he got next to nothing. Can you imagine how a man can be so ridiculous as to give up all his prospects in life for that kind of thing!”

“I believe he has real talent, to say the least of it,” answered Harry.

“Well, it’s a long time showing itself. You should see Mr. Baring’s studio.”

“Mr. Baring is a good many years older than Hubert, dear, and I’ve always heard that he had a very hard struggle of it.”

“Yes, he says so himself. Oh, of course, if Hubert is going to turn out like that—but the question is, will he?”

“Only Time can answer that,” said Harry. “Am I going to turn out a successful doctor?”

“Who knows, if you yourself don’t?” laughed Connie. “It seems dreadful that men have to wait so long before they are certain of themselves. It’s much pleasanter to be a girl, after all. You don’t have to think about anything.”





CHAPTER VI.

A HELPFUL MODEL.

HARRY went away without having said anything to Constance on the subject so near to his heart. He was so afraid of troubling her, of taking an unfair advantage of her innocence and inexperience. She was evidently happy, and in good hands ; he could see her when he wished ; so that altogether he thought it would be much wiser to wait until things were better with him.

Constance herself forgot all about Harry as soon as he had shut the door behind

him. She never had room in her mind for many things at a time, and just now she was fully absorbed in pleasant anticipation of her sittings to Mr. Baring, which were to begin the very next morning.

Mabel or Robson was to accompany her, and Mrs. Chesham thought it advisable to give her a hint as to her behaviour.

“Don’t laugh and joke too much with Mr. Baring, dear. Remember, he is an artist.”

Connie, as usual, opened her eyes wide.

“What difference does his being an artist make? Artists are just the same as other men, aren’t they?”

“Of course, my child; but still—one thinks—one has always had the impression that they were rather—rather—well, rather free and easy kind of people, you know.”

Connie put up her chin with a comical air of dignity.

“How absurd your mother is!” she said to Mabel, as they left the house together. “Any one would think I was a baby!”

“Instead of a hard-headed, experienced old maid!” smiled Mabel.

“No, I’m not that either,” said Connie, perfectly seriously; “but still I think I can take care of myself.”

They found Mr. Baring quite ready for them, and were taken straight into the studio. Connie was struck with a sudden fit of shyness, and fluttered about, trying to put off the moment when she would have to begin sitting. Mr. Baring seemed in no hurry, however; he went on putting a few last touches to some other work, at the same time flattering and confusing

Mabel by asking her opinion about some trifling arrangement of drapery.

Mabel came and stood behind him, watching the slight, well-shaped fingers as they worked with such seeming ease. As she looked, a wave of despair came over her. How should she ever attain to a thousandth part of such skill as that? And yet, how dead and flat things were without it! She had an impulse to run home and burn easel, palette, and brushes, and devote herself to hemming dusters for the rest of her life.

“I should like to see some of your work,” said Mr. Baring presently, looking round at her with a smile.

“My work! I was at that moment thinking what a paltry waste of time it is for me to attempt to paint. I can never do anything really good, and if one’s work is worth nothing——”

“Still, if it amuses you——” said Mr. Baring, indulgently.

“I have never done it for amusement!” Mabel answered quickly. “I was foolish enough to think that I might take up art as a profession—as a man does.”

“Yes, there are a great many lady artists nowadays,” said Mr. Baring; “but really I don’t think they will ever do much. Art is a man’s work.”

“There *have* been women,” said Mabel, timidly—“Rosa Bonheur, Angelica Kaufmann——”

Mr. Baring laughed.

“Those are almost all. Think of *our* numbers!”

Mabel pondered. She had never seen things in this light before. She had thought the deficiency lay in herself, not in her sex.

“Do you really think a woman cannot become a good artist?” she asked at last.

Mr. Baring answered, “I think a woman can be a clever artist—sometimes; but a really good artist—well, no, if you must have it.”

“Why not?” asked Mabel, bluntly. She was not thinking of herself now, but of her whole sisterhood.

Mr. Baring paused for a minute. He was not accustomed to put his thoughts into words.

“Well, you know,” he began slowly, “they are so—they are not—their minds are not—they are not steady enough.”

“You mean they cannot concentrate themselves enough?” asked Mabel.

Mr. Baring nodded.

“Precisely. That was the word I wanted. Women are not meant to take up a pro-

fession seriously. They are far too charming, too——”

“Inferior,” put in Mabel, as he stopped for a word.

Here Constance interrupted. Her shyness had vanished directly she found that she was not the object of attraction.

“Well, Mr. Baring, where am I to sit?”

Mr. Baring’s eyes clouded over, but if he would have preferred to go on talking to Mabel, no one could have guessed it. He put away his work, and showed Constance where he wanted her to stand.

“He, he!” giggled Connie. “I feel as if I were going to be photographed.”

“We won’t be as cruel as that to you,” said Baring, taking Connie’s fair head in both his hands as unceremoniously as if it had belonged to the lay figure in the

corner, and adjusting it to the right position.

Connie got quite red, and said, "Oh!"

"You must forgive my posing you without any ceremony," said Mr. Baring; "and now forget that you are being painted."

He made an observation or two, which had the effect of setting Connie off talking at the top of her speed, which was exactly what he wanted. The more he looked at Connie, the less inclined to paint her he felt.

"Insidious little face!" he thought. "My *confrère*, Morell, would rave about it, and pass the other one by almost without notice. Shall I be rewarded, I wonder? Will she sit to me?"

Mabel was absently watching the artist, while thinking over what he had said about women.

Was he right? Was it, after all, vain and presumptuous to have aspired so high—to have thought that, if women had not left deep footprints on the ground Mr. Baring so jealously claimed for his sex, it was because they were wont to step too lightly and too quickly, not because they lacked sufficient weight in themselves? What was the difference, the vital difference, between an ambitious woman and an ambitious man? If the woman were as ready as the man to sacrifice ease of life, her no doubt characteristic and hereditary love of indolence, her social vanity, her youth, was it a fact that by reason of her sex she was condemned only to bear the labour and heat of the day, whilst no golden guerdon awaited *her* at the end?

Mabel sat and watched Stephen Baring,

as with unfaltering hand he went about his work; she noted the stern, fixed expression of his eyes and mouth, and felt her whole soul rise up in revolt against his edict. The great painter had done more than sketch in Constance's pretty head that day; he had breathed upon an already kindled spark, and had fanned it into a little flame which might now be safely left to time.

Mr. Baring himself, however, was not thinking of his last words to Mabel. What he had said he thought, and had always thought, perhaps excusably; for he had seen thousands of worthless attempts at painting by women, who seemed so satisfied with their own work, that they were beyond the reach of criticism. How many promising girl-students had he not also seen vanish into that limbo already

so extensively peopled with the shades of unpersevering and frivolous women! He considered it the absolute duty of every man consulted on the subject to dissuade and discourage the weaker sex from embarking on waters on which they were perfectly certain to make shipwreck sooner or later. He worked on, therefore, totally oblivious of any effect his words might have had on Mabel's mind. *Mind* was an abstraction which it rarely occurred to Mr. Baring to associate with the sex.

Connie, meanwhile, was prattling on in her usual way, entirely to her own satisfaction.

“Do you know, now I am used to it,” she said, at the end of about five minutes, “I don't mind sitting a bit. At first, something ran like cold water all down my spine, and I felt as if I half wanted

to laugh and half to cry; but now that's all over, and I rather like it. May I get down and look at what you've done, please?"

This suggestion being answered in the negative, she continued—

"Robson—that's my maid, you know; she used to be my nurse—was quite unhappy at the idea of my sitting. She says it's unlucky."

"Unlucky!" echoed Mr. Baring. "I never heard *that* before."

"Yes; unlucky. She had a third cousin who once sat to an artist for a portrait of a Saracen's head."

"A Saracen's head, Connie!" said Mabel.

"Yes; a Saracen's head. You see, they—the third cousin's parents—kept a public-house, and they wanted a new sign; and

as this artist wanted to pay his bill, and couldn't——”

Mr. Baring smiled grimly; he had heard of such a thing before.

“—and couldn't, he offered to do them a sign. The house was called ‘The Saracen's Head,’ but, of course, they couldn't give him a real Saracen to paint from, so he took the third cousin, who was very dark complexioned. Robson remembers it perfectly, because they borrowed her best Sunday shawl to make a turban of, and they crumpled it so dreadfully, she was never able to wear it afterwards.”

“But, except to Robson's shawl, I don't see where the ill luck comes in,” observed Mr. Baring.

“I haven't got to that yet. Well, the sign was painted and hung up, and just a year and a day—which, Robson says, is

always the time luck turns—afterwards, her cousin took to his bed with scarlet fever, and never left it until he was carried out of the door feet foremost.”

As Constance pronounced these last words in unconscious imitation of Robson’s own solemn tones, Mr. Baring laughed more than they had ever seen him laugh yet.

“I think your maid must be amusing,” he said. “You must bring her here some time, and get her to talk.”

“Yes, she can come with me sometimes instead of Mabel,” said Connie, placidly; and Mabel felt that it was very small-minded of her to have an impulse to throw Connie’s muff, which she was holding, at that empty, but guileless little head.

“So others, you observe, share your prejudice, which you did not mention the first time I met you, about sitting,” ob-

served Mr. Baring to Mabel. Before she could frame a reply, Constance broke in—

“*Mabel's* prejudice! Oh, she isn't such a goose as Robson. Why, she has sat dozens of times to Miss Stuart, and she promised Hubert the other day she would sit to him.”

Mr. Baring paused in his work, and turned round. His brows drew together, and his eyes positively blazed, as he looked Mabel full in the face.

“It seems, then, that it is only to *me* you will not sit.”

Mabel was too vexed to answer, and he went on—

“Perhaps you will at least tell me what is your objection? Do you fear that I should not do your features as much justice as—Miss Stuart or—Mr. Durant?”

The sneer which accompanied the last

words was unmistakable, and roused Mabel at once.

“I imagine that every one has a right to refuse to sit to an artist without explanation,” she said proudly.

“A right—yes,” answered Mr. Baring, softening his tone immediately. He did not wish to quarrel with Mabel. “A right. But surely it is a very selfish thing to do. If you knew,” he went on, coming a step nearer, and looking at Mabel’s downcast face with an intentness which, in spite of herself, drew her eyes to his—“if you only knew how much I want you to sit to me! You have refused—I don’t understand why—and I have never asked anybody for a favour twice before, but I do ask you. Will you?”

Mabel’s eyes fell directly his voice ceased.

“I don’t know—I must think,” she murmured.

“Eureka!” thought Baring, and, putting down his brush, said—

“Thank you, Miss Durant. I won’t trouble you any longer to-day.”

Connie, who had not been able to catch any of the low-spoken dialogue between Mr. Baring and Mabel, but who had vaguely gathered that Baring wanted Mabel to sit to him, descended from her platform with a slightly aggrieved air, which was entirely wasted upon both the others.

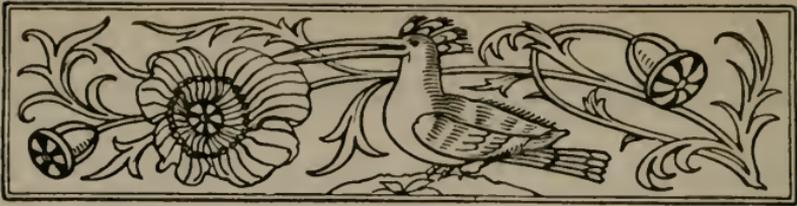
Mr. Baring took leave of Mabel with a look meant to express entreaty and admiration, and from which he completely succeeded in eliminating any sign of the triumph which really possessed him.

As he went back into his studio, after

showing the girls out, he cast a derisive look at the easel, on which a suggestion of Connie's piquant face had already appeared, and murmured, with his hand to his mouth—

“I can wait your own time now, Miss Moore. I am not an impatient man.”





CHAPTER VII.

A PROPOSAL.

SOMEWHAT to Mabel's astonishment, the sittings went on very regularly after the first one. She was surprised, because it was a new idea for Connie to persevere in a thing when the novelty of it had worn off; and sitting still was just the very last thing that she would have expected her to like. Yet Constance not only always remembered the day, and was ready at the proper time, but was even anxious and eager to go.

Mabel managed so that Robson should always accompany her young mistress; and Connie made no demur to this arrangement, although usually she was very vexed if Mabel did not go everywhere with her.

Why Mabel sent Robson, she could perhaps hardly have explained. It was not to save herself trouble, nor because she did not care to go. Perhaps the real and true reason was that she did care to go. She had found herself thinking a great deal about Mr. Baring after that first sitting. The artist's look and tone and voice had come between her and her work, had obtruded themselves into her dreams; nay, had even tried to force open the door of that shrine hitherto sacred to one name only.

Mabel was not a child. She knew very well what it means when a girl's thoughts

begin to centre themselves upon any one man, and yet she could not quite fathom her own mind. There was Hubert; she was quite sure she loved him, and equally certain that he knew she loved him. Why, then, if she loved Hubert, had she begun to think so much about Mr. Baring? She knew almost as little of the artist as one human being can know of another. She had only spoken to him two or three times, and not a word had passed between them that was worth remembering. She was almost sure she did not like him, that his mind was distinctly antagonistic to her own. Why, then, did she feel so inclined to go to the studio the next time Constance went? Was it out of curiosity? There was certainly, to her, a touch of mystery about Mr. Baring, and Mabel was a woman. But although she was a woman,

she possessed a clear and logical understanding, and it had always been her custom to be very honest with herself. Patiently she analyzed her feelings, and at last came to the conclusion that, although curiosity went for something, vanity—pure and simple vanity—went for a great deal.

“I turn up my nose at Connie, and I am every bit as bad as she. Worse, because I am supposed to have brains, and she isn't,” she reflected.

Having thus settled matters with herself, she made two resolutions: one, that she would not go to the studio again for some time; the other, that she would not, in any case, or under any pressure, sit for Mr. Baring.

Meanwhile, the artist himself was working at Connie's head something in the

spirit of a child who makes up his mind to take nasty medicine for the sake of the spoonful of jam to follow. Not that it is fair to compare Constance with nasty medicine; only a barbarian could have done such a thing, and Mr. Baring was not a barbarian—he was a Royal Academician. But having to paint Connie was like having to read the alphabet when you are longing for a book, a special book. She was so very, very fair, and Mr. Baring disliked fair women. If her hair had been red he could have borne it better, but that particularly flaxen fairness provoked him. He was always telling himself that she was exactly like a wax doll—shadeless hair, blue eyes, red lips, pink cheeks, and little nose.

“She’d melt if one were to put her too near the fire,” he thought fretfully.

All of which was very unkind, for he had himself asked Connie to sit to him, and he had never, among either professional models or enthusiastic young women, had so patient and painstaking a sitter. After the first time she did not even annoy him with her chatter; she became wonderfully silent and docile, never moving from the position in which he had placed her, and always asking, with a curious, wistful little smile, as he opened the door for her, if she had sat well.

Personally, indeed, Baring by no means disliked her. Who had ever disliked Connie? He began to treat her, by degrees, like a pet child, allowing her to wash and clean his brushes and dust his tables, to his aunt's extreme astonishment and to Connie's delight—she who, in Mabel's painting-room, could not bear the

smell of turpentine, and shrieked if she got the least drop on her hands.

On one occasion she found the artist woefully embarrassed by the arrangement of some drapery, which needed more skilful fingers than any in his own house. Connie at once begged to be allowed to do it, and accomplished her task so deftly that Mr. Baring was delighted.

She also appeared to have, in some manner, ingratiated herself with Mrs. Simes, for that by no means universally amiable old lady expressed herself with what, in her, almost amounted to enthusiasm.

“A nice, helpful young thing!” she said to her nephew one day after Connie had been there. “No stuck-up pride about *her*. I’ll tell you what it is, Stephen; you ought to marry that girl.”

“What girl?” asked Baring, who had a habit of letting his aunt talk without troubling himself to attend to what she was saying.

“*What* girl? Why, Miss Durant, to be sure. She has twenty thousand pounds.”

“How do you know that?” asked Baring.

“She told me, of course. She’s a simple little creature, easy enough to get anything out of,” said Mrs. Simes, complacently. “Twenty thousand pounds all to herself.”

“I don’t admire her,” said Baring, indifferently.

Mrs. Simes opened her small eyes to their fullest extent.

“Admire her! What’s that got to do with it? You’re not going to marry a wife so that she may sit to you all day long, I suppose! I shan’t last for ever,

and it would be much better for you to marry, so that I can train your wife to keep your house properly. Now, this girl is quiet and not self-willed, as far as I can see, and wouldn't give me any trouble. And twenty thousand pounds is a good bit of money."

Baring got up, and left the table—they had been at the meal called by courtesy supper—without vouchsafing any reply to the old woman's ramblings; but arrived in his studio, he lighted a pipe, and sat down to think.

Marry Connie! The idea was entirely new to him; it had never so much as glanced through his head before. Women are always thinking about match-making; once or twice before Mrs. Simes had hinted that he ought to marry, but he had never taken the slightest notice. But Connie?

Yes, it was quite true; she was a nice, neat-fingered, helpful little thing, who would certainly not be in his way. She would never want to lead a fashionable life, or spend money right and left. He was quite sure that he would be able to do as he liked with her. Was she not already as submissive and tractable as possible? She was not very wise, perhaps, but he did not approve of high-flown and self-ideaed women. And then she certainly had twenty thousand pounds. Aunt Simes was by no means a fool, although she did chatter so detestably occasionally. Connie was pretty enough when you were not painting her, and she was certainly worth the twenty thousand pounds—which, nevertheless, Mr. Baring would infinitely have preferred without her.

When Connie next came to sit, after

Robson had been despatched—as very often happened, although Mrs. Chesham was ignorant of the fact—on some errand which would take her out of the way for at least an hour, Mr. Baring, after posing the girl as usual, looked at her more attentively than he had ever done before.

There could certainly be no doubt whatever as to her prettiness, whether it were paintable prettiness or not. She would make a more than presentable hostess; for of course, when once married, he would have to entertain to a certain extent, as his excuse of bachelorhood would be no longer available. That was undoubtedly a drawback. He had an objection to waste money in the entertainment of fools. Still, there were the twenty thousand pounds, and Aunt Simes would see that nothing was done extravagantly.

“Are there any brushes to be washed to-day?” asked Connie, in the fresh young voice which her cousin Harry thought the sweetest upon earth, but which Mr. Baring had never noticed.

“No, thanks,” he said absently.

Connie looked disappointed.

“Why has not your friend come with you again?” he asked presently, without looking at her.

“She is very busy always; she has so much to do, and she paints a great deal.”

“I asked her to sit to me,” said Baring.

“Did you?”

“Yes. Don't stick out your lips like that; I am just at your mouth. Didn't she tell you?”

“No; she didn't mention it at all.”

Mr. Baring lifted his eyebrows, and painted away savagely for a minute or two. Then he said—

“Tell me, what sort of a girl is Miss Moore?”

“What sort of a girl?” repeated Connie, thinking, ‘I wonder why he bothers me about Mabel so to-day?’ “Oh, she’s very—nice. Awfully clever, you know, and very funny sometimes. She always seems so much older, though, than she really is. She has such opinions.”

“Opinions?” said Baring, looking at Connie in astonishment.

“Yes; they worry one sometimes. About what people ought to do to other people, don’t you know, and things of that sort.”

“Oh, a blue-stocking!” remarked Baring, contemptuously.

“N—n—o; I don't think she's that,” said Connie, as if loath to fasten too much blame upon her absent friend. “She is only very serious sometimes.”

Mr. Baring made an inarticulate sound, and nothing more was said for a few minutes. Presently he spoke again.

“Do you like living with the Cheshams, Miss Durant?”

“Yes,” Connie answered indifferently.

“Are you very happy there? Should you be sorry to leave them?”

Connie opened eyes and mouth. “I'm not going to leave them. I am as comfortable there as I could be anywhere—till Hubert gets rich, and I go to live with him.”

Mr. Baring gave a short laugh. “Till your brother gets rich? Why, have you not enough for two?”

“Yes, plenty,” Connie answered eagerly; “but somehow Hubert won’t hear of it. He says he must be rich first.”

“And are you really going to wait until that day arrives?” asked Baring, with a sneer. “You will be an old maid by that time.”

“Very likely,” assented Connie, with a doleful nod of her head, and the corners of her mouth going down.

“Perhaps, though, you will neither ever go to live with your brother, nor continue to stay with the Cheshams,” said Mr. Baring presently, in a very gentle voice.

Connie looked at him inquiringly, and after a minute said helplessly, “I don’t know *what* you mean.”

“Young ladies marry,” said the artist, stooping to look at his work closely.

Connie made no answer; and when

Baring glanced at her a moment later, he saw she had grown very pale.

“Have you taken a vow of celibacy?” he asked jestingly.

Constance put her hand nervously to her throat, and looked round the room.

“Have you?” repeated the artist.

“No,” answered Connie, with lips quivering like a child’s.

Mr. Baring gave one careful sweep of his brush to the delicate shade beneath the eyes of Connie’s portrait, and then, laying down his palette, leisurely walked up to the girl, who was trembling all over.

“Will you marry *me*, Constance?” he asked, leaning over her so as to look full into her eyes.

Constance gave a little cry, a sob, and flung herself into the painter’s arms.

Baring held her close for a minute—it

was not an unpleasant sensation to feel her fluttering heart against his own. Then he put her back in her chair, and wiped away the tears which were running fast down her cheeks.

“There, then,” he said cheerfully; “that’s all settled. So, you see, I was a true prophet after all. You will leave the Ches-hams, and you won’t go to live with your brother.”

“How—how—long have you loved me?” sobbed Connie, in a few minutes.

The painter’s eyes wandered to another easel, on which stood a sketch of his new composition picture. “She can sit for one of the maidens in the background,” he thought. Then he said, “Oh, ever since I’ve known you, dear.”

“So have I,” whispered Connie, rapturously; and then, clinging close to him, she

breathed, "I was so afraid you were going to like Mabel best."

The image of the face he so coveted, and which always eluded him, rose before Baring, and his eyes grew deep and stern. "Mabel!" he said scornfully. "Mabel! Oh no, my child. You need not have been afraid; I should never have asked *Mabel* to marry me."





CHAPTER VIII.

“WHEN ONE LOVES.”

PERHAPS Mabel had never in her life been so astonished as she was when Connie came flying into her painting-room with her news.

“Say it again, Connie. I don’t think I heard right.”

“I—am—engaged—to—be—married—to—Mr.—Baring,” repeated Connie impressively, inwardly delighted at Mabel’s bewilderment.

“It’s a joke, isn’t it, Connie?”

“A joke? Certainly not. I don’t see anything to be surprised at.”

“Only—isn’t he a little old for you, dear?”

“Not a bit. Twenty or thirty years don’t matter when one loves a person,” said Constance, with an air of matronly wisdom.

Mabel came and kissed her little friend very tenderly. “My darling, I do hope you’ll be happy. Are you sure, Connie”—holding the girl a little away from her, and gazing earnestly into her flushed, excited face—“are you *quite* sure, Connie dear, that you love him?”

A proud, soft look came into Connie’s face—a look that Mabel had never seen there before. She clasped her hands impulsively.

“Love him! I have loved him ever since we first saw him in poor Hubert’s

studio. He is so great, so good—such a genius, Mab.”

“Yes, dear, he is all that,” responded Mabel, heartily. “There are not many men like him.”

She stood at the window, with her arm round Connie, looking down thoughtfully into the street below.

Constance soon broke in upon her meditations. “We are to be married quite soon—directly I can get my things ready. Oh, Mabel, won’t it be fun!”

Mabel looked blankly at her. Quite soon! Somehow she had never thought of Connie as any man’s wife.

“Where is your mother? Do get her up here; I want to tell her in some place where—where——”

“Where George is not. I sympathize. I’ll go down and see if I can find her.”

“But don’t tell her yourself,” called Connie, as Mabel was going out of the room.

“No, no; I’ll divulge nothing.”

Mabel ran down to the study and knocked at the door, a mark of respect which Mr. Chesham always exacted.

“Come in,” said the owner of the room.

Mabel’s head only obeyed this invitation. She looked at her mother without speaking, which was her habitual mode of intimating to Mrs. Chesham that she was wanted.

The little woman rose gladly. Any diversion was welcome which broke the monotony of the long hours between luncheon and dinner.

“What is it, dear?” she asked, when the door had been closed with all the precaution expected from the poor invalid inside.

“ News ! ” said Mabel, melodramatically. “ But the stairs are the penalty you must pay for such a rarity. Come along ; and prepare to be—astonished.”

They found Constance arranging her curls before the little glass on the chimney-piece.

Mrs. Chesham, after glancing at her, looked curiously round the room as if she expected to find some tangible embodiment of Mabel’s promise ; failing, however, to discover anything unusual, she asked once more—

“ What is it, Mabel ? Have you sold a picture ? ”

“ No ; better than that. Guess again.”

“ Have you—is there—— Oh, tell me quick, Mab. I thought I heard George call.”

“ George’s voice, melodious though it

may be, has no power in this domain,” said Mabel, solemnly. “Call he never so sweetly, you will stay here as long as I want you. The news has nothing to do with me ; it concerns Connie.”

She looked at Constance, who, blushing up to her hair, hid her face shyly on Mrs. Chesham’s shoulder.

Mrs. Chesham’s wits were by no means wont to be as quick as her daughter’s, and yet they jumped at once to a conclusion which Mabel would never have dreamed of.

“You are going to be married, my child !”

Constance only held her closer, and left it to Mabel to say—

“Yes, oh rival of *Ædipus* ; you have guessed rightly—though how you did it is a mystery to me.”

“My dear child,” exclaimed Mrs. Chesham, warmly, “I am so glad!”

And she really did feel glad, although even at that moment a shadow of bills, butchers’ books, and George crossed her mind.

“But don’t you want to know any more?” laughed Mabel. “Or are you going to be content with the knowledge that Connie is going to marry—the moon perhaps?”

“Be quiet, silly girl! And now tell me all about it, my darling. Or shall I guess again?”

“Yes, guess,” murmured Connie.

Mrs. Chesham looked very wise.

“I think I know, my dear,” she said, stroking Connie’s hair. “It is your cousin Harry, isn’t it?”

Her words produced an unlooked-for

effect. Constance started out of her friend's arms, and said, with a face which expressed anything but the pleased acquiescence Mrs. Chesham had looked for—

“*Harry!* Good gracious! I forgot all about him!”

“No, no, mother,” Mabel broke in; “that's all wrong. It's Mr. Baring whom Constance is going to marry.”

It was Mrs. Chesham's turn to start now.

“Mr. Baring! But he's old enough to be your fa——” She caught herself up.

“Yes, he's a good deal older; but Connie says twenty or thirty years don't matter when you love a person,” said Mabel, demurely.

“And an artist!” continued Mrs. Chesham. “An artist who lives, as one may say, from hand to mouth. I'm afraid,

darling, your aunt would hardly have approved."

"I don't care," Connie said irreverently.

"I love him, and I mean to marry him."

"And so, of course, as she is her own mistress, I could only kiss her, and wish her all the happiness in the world," said little Mrs. Chesham ten minutes later, when she had communicated the astounding intelligence to her husband.

"Just like you. All women are fools!"

"George, *what* did you say, love?"

"I said, 'All women are fools,' and you're not the smallest of them. Why couldn't you have dissuaded her, little idiot that she is?"

"But what could I do? I did say he was older than she, and an artist, and she only said she loved him."

"Love? Pah! I never heard of such

rubbish! The word ‘love’ appears to me to be synonymous with selfishness, ignorance, and all the other vices that people want to give way to. I have no patience with it—none.”

“But, my dear pet,” said Mrs. Chesham, with a bewildered drawing together of her eyebrows, “I don’t quite see why poor Connie is selfish to wish to marry Mr. Baring, although, of course, I quite agree with you that it is very foolish of her.”

“Not selfish? Who ever heard of a woman that wasn’t selfish? Do you suppose that girl thinks we give her up a part of our house, allow her to share our society, turn ourselves inside out, for her benefit—for our pleasure? Doesn’t she know that it is a matter of pounds, shillings, and pence? Do you suppose she doesn’t know that? Come now!”

said Mr. Chesham, looking angrily at his wife.

Mrs. Chesham gave a faint, apologetic smile.

“One could hardly expect her to become an old maid for our sakes,” she answered mildly.

“Expect!” repeated her husband, sarcastically. “Oh, of course not! Now you’ll go saying I expected such a thing. How coarsely you put things, Emily! There, my neuralgia’s coming on again.”

“My poor dear! Let me get your drops.”

“Oh no, never mind. A little pain more or less is of small account in the life of a sufferer like myself.”

He leaned back and closed his eyes. Mrs. Chesham looked at the fire with a weary expression on her face that would

have made her daughter's heart bound with indignation.

Presently the invalid spoke again.

“What kind of man is this Baring?”

“H'm!” answered his wife, reflectively. “He's an artist—a Royal Academician.”

“I know that. Of course he is an atrocious painter. The two go together.”

“He is very good-looking, or perhaps rather striking looking.”

“A woman's man. Is he a gentleman?”

“Well, really, George, I don't know,” said Mrs. Chesham, after a pause, during which she had tried to bring Mr. Baring before her mind's eye. “I've not seen much of him. His manners are good. Still, there were some things about his house—his teapot——”

“Good heavens!” exclaimed Mr.

Chesham, so testily as to make Mrs. Chesham start. "I never saw such a woman! I ask her if a man's a gentleman, and she launches forth about his teapot!"

"I beg your pardon, my dear," faltered his wife.

"Oh, it doesn't matter! I shall never teach you to be coherent in your conversation—may as well give it up."

There was silence for a few minutes, during which Mr. Chesham breathed so stertorously that his wife feared she had nearly provoked him into an apoplectic fit. When he next spoke, however, it was in the most mellifluous of voices.

"Is it not nearly dinner-time, my pet?"

"Yes, darling, only ten minutes more."

"Ah, I feel quite exhausted. In fact, if it were not so impossible, I should almost fancy I felt hungry. I think, my

love, in honour of Miss Durant's news, that a bottle of champagne would not be amiss. Eh? Suppose you get up a couple of that last Perrier Jouet—will you, my very dear love?”





CHAPTER IX.

QUALIFYING FOR THE POSITION.

HUBERT was quite as much astonished at Connie's engagement as Mabel and her mother had been, although perhaps for rather different reasons. He had always been so accustomed to look upon Connie as a very charming child, who needed all the protection and care of himself and Robson, that it startled him to find that other people should see her in another light. And that Stephen Baring, a man whom all the world revered and looked up to on account of his genius,

who had surmounted and emerged so triumphantly from those difficulties which he himself found so terrible and heart-breaking—that this man, now at the zenith of his fame, should choose for the lifelong companion of his master-mind a—dear little thing like Connie, a child to whom the word art was almost represented by picture-books, and who, good little girl though she was, was as unfit to mate with a clever and distinguished man as a wren with an eagle—why, it was absurd, utterly absurd!

“He takes Connie and leaves Mabel!” he thought with bewilderment—“Mabel, who is fit for any one, however lofty his genius!”

Here he looked half mockingly round his bare room, furnished lavishly, it was true, with unsold pictures of his own.

“Fit for any one! And I—I, poor out-at-elbows wretch, who thank the Fates for a five-guinea commission, and would think my fortune made if I sold a picture for ten—I aspire to such a woman! Am I—is she to wait until I am as old as Baring—until to the luxury of a spacious and gorgeous studio I can add that of a wife? She will not wait for me. I should be a selfish cur to ask or to expect it. I shall succeed some day, I suppose, and then what shall I have in the world? Fame, fortune, and the opportunity of looking at the happiness of the man—I wonder who he will be?—who has won the only thing which would have made success worth having. I am glad, though, that Baring did not choose Mabel. That would have been hard to bear, and yet how natural! But Connie! Poor Baring! Poor Connie!”

Neither Baring nor Connie would have thanked Hubert for his sympathy. They were both distinctly contented with their situation. The more Mr. Baring thought of it, the more he liked the idea of Connie's twenty thousand pounds, and the more highly did he esteem Mrs. Simes's common sense, which had opened his eyes to the prize he would have let slip out of mere carelessness. It was, perhaps, irritating to be disturbed so constantly at his work by little notes from his *fiancée*, which had to be answered on the spot, for the purpose of reassuring her that he was well and loved her still, nor was it much more congenial to his spirit to have to accompany her to various picture-galleries, there to be obliged to listen to her raptures about all the bad pictures, and her calm and sweeping criticisms of those that were tolerable or good.

Still, these were the days of probation. He had shortened them as much as possible, for he was to be married in six weeks, which would give Connie time, as she said, to prepare her trousseau and learn "all about art."

For Constance had adopted a very high idea of her duty towards her future husband. She was going to learn all he knew, so that he could talk to her about his pictures, when he would soon find out she was not such a silly little thing as people thought her. For this reason she made him take her to the picture-galleries, where she honestly endeavoured to see the differences between one picture and another, with the result just mentioned. She even came up to Mabel's room one day with a drawing-board, a pencil, and a piece of indiarubber.

“I want you to teach me to draw, and then to paint, dear,” she said, as Mabel looked up questioningly.

Repressing her very strong inclination to laugh, Mabel gave her a lesson. At the end of ten minutes, Connie jumped up and stretched her cramped fingers.

“That’ll do for to-day, dear, thank you. It doesn’t seem so difficult after all. I am sure I shall get on.”

And day after day she came upstairs, and worked away at her board, reminding Mabel of a child who does accounts to “be like father.”

They saw a good deal of Mr. Baring during those six weeks, for he dined and spent the evening with them almost daily. After dinner, George, who made a point of being particularly frigid before Mr. Baring, as became one of such noble

lineage and restricted means, retired into his study with his wife, leaving Constance and Mr. Baring to amuse themselves in the drawing-room, with Mabel as *chaperon*. Mabel by no means relished this position, especially when she found it to mean that she and Mr. Baring were to do all the talking, Connie's interruptions being evidently unwelcome to her lover. After the first evening or two, she took to going up to her own room, only reappearing in time to say good night.

Even now she was unable to quite make up her mind as to what she really thought of the artist. Of course she knew that such a man must wear a cloak to all but his peers, and among them she was quite certain he would never count a woman. The Man in the Iron Mask himself was not a greater mystery to

her than was this man whose genius the whole world recognized, who would leave immortal work behind him, to testify to the wonderful powers of his brain and hand. His genius was patent; she had known about that long before she had known him—seen him, rather; for she felt she did not know him now.

What was he? What did he think of? What lofty musings went on behind those deep, impenetrable eyes? Did he sneer and mock at Connie's childish sayings, or did he feel the all-excusing tenderness which makes even the foolish speeches of those we love sweet in our ears? Or perhaps he did not hear them, absorbed as he was in the mighty stream of grand imaginings which flowed through his artist brain, to find such perfect realization in the work of his hand.

He had not asked her to sit again, and she was glad of that, for it seemed to her as if she had made a kind of vow in Hubert's name not to do so. Poor Hubert! He was very much on her mind. He was getting on no better, from a pecuniary point of view, while lately she had been afraid that he was becoming more gloomy and despondent than ever. And she was so powerless to help him! He was too proud to speak of his love, and she could not speak first. Had that been possible, she would have told him that he need not wait until fame came to him to ask her to be his; that she would rather work with him than only reap with him; that together they would conquer, where singly his strength might fail him. But no; she was a woman, and must obey the unwritten law which men and women have

framed for themselves, often to the undoing of both.

Mrs. Chesham was very much exercised as to Connie's future habitation.

“I want to know,” she said to Mabel, “how things are to be arranged. I consider, and I am sure Hubert considers, that I stand as nearly in the relation of a mother to Constance as any one can; and what I wish to be told is, how about that teapot, and all that that teapot implies? What about that dreadful old person, Mrs.—Simes, is it? Is she to continue to live in the house?”

“I'm sure I don't know, any more than you do, mother,” Mabel answered.

“Well, we ought to know; and if Connie won't ask him, I will,” said Mrs. Chesham, courageously.

The very next day, therefore, Mrs.

Chesham, instead of accompanying George in his retreat as usual, came upstairs with the others, and prepared for the attack.

She first of all talked upon general subjects, until Connie fretfully wished to herself she would go downstairs, and then gradually drew round to the question of the wedding.

“Only three weeks more! How time flies! I suppose you have nearly finished all your preparations, Mr. Baring?”

“Quite,” answered Mr. Baring, composedly.

“Did you have much trouble? But I suppose your good aunt helped you? A man is always so at sea in these things.”

“I have not made any changes in my house, except one or two in the studio,” observed Mr. Baring.

“Oh — haven’t you?” faltered Mrs.

Chesham, finding, to her great disgust, that she was somehow unable to say any more. "I thought—it is usual——"

Mr. Baring waited for the end of the sentence without the least change of expression. As no end came, he said quietly—

"No, I have made no changes. I thought Constance would be able to do that at her own time and liking. It will amuse her after we are married."

"Yes, it will be much nicer so," assented Connie, eagerly, with a by no means grateful look at poor Mrs. Chesham, who felt herself defeated, but thought it right to make yet one more attempt.

"And your aunt, Mrs. Simes? I suppose she will be—— Has she any children of her own with whom she can live?"

"Mrs. Simes has no present intention

of leaving my house," said Mr. Baring, frowning heavily.

Mrs. Chesham arose and fled, acknowledging herself beaten, rather to Mabel's amusement.

When they were left alone, Connie took her favourite place, a stool at her lover's feet—a reversal of the ancient position of lovers.

"Is—is—Mrs. Simes always going to live with us, then, Stephen?" she asked, in a rather doleful tone.

"My dear child," returned Mr. Baring, with another frown, which Connie, however, could not see, "what reason have you for not wishing her to live with us?"

"I didn't say I did not wish her to; only—only—wouldn't it be nicer, Stephen, to be by ourselves, quite alone?"

“Of course, if you insist upon it, it shall be done. But I must say it seems rather hard to turn a poor old woman, who has served me faithfully for so long, into the streets. She has no other relations and no means.”

“But we could give her some!” proposed Connie, cheerfully. “Out of my money, you know.”

“And besides,” continued Baring, taking no notice of Connie’s remark, “she is a very excellent housekeeper, and would take all the worry and trouble of the place off your hands.”

“Yes; we should have to have a housekeeper, of course,” said Connie.

“Of course!” answered Baring, and Connie detected no irony in his voice; “and there you have one whom you are quite certain of. And she is so fond of

you. Why, she is always singing your praises!"

"Very well, dear," said Connie, with a little sigh; "of course, what you say must be right, and I dare say I shan't mind her when I've got used to her."





CHAPTER X.

DOMESTIC ECONOMY.

“PLEASE, mum, will you give me out some candles for the dining-room; there ain’t but one, and that half burned, there.”

Mrs. Simes turned sharply round upon the untidy-looking servant girl.

“Give you out more candles? Certainly not! We’ve never had more than the one, and that gives quite sufficient light.”

“I was only thinking that for a newly

married couple——” began the girl; but Mrs. Simes cut her short with—

“Come now, be off to your work. Your master will be here directly.”

“Old skinflint!” muttered the girl, as she went away.

“No, no,” thought old Mrs. Simes, giving a finishing polish to the drawing-room tables; “we begin as we mean to go on. Mrs. Baring must take us as we are, and as we intend to be. Ah! there they are, I suppose”—as the front-door bell pealed through the house.

After some delay, caused by Martha’s having paused in the act of cleaning her boots, to wash her grimy hands, the door was opened; and Mrs. Simes, advancing leisurely across the hall, beheld her nephew, his newly married wife, and Robson, together with what seemed to

her a most preposterous amount of luggage, which the cabman was unloading with sundry groans and adjectives.

Connie came to meet her husband's aunt with her old sweet smile.

“Here we are at last!” she cried. “So tired and so hungry, are we not, Stephen? I thought the cab would never get here; it did crawl so.”

“Who's going to take all those enormous boxes upstairs?” inquired Mrs. Simes sourly, somewhat gingerly returning Connie's ready kiss—the first that had fallen upon her withered cheek for many a long year.

“All! Why, there are only two—mine and Robson's, and Stephen's Gladstone bag,” laughed Connie. “I suppose the rest of my things got here all right from the Cheshams'?”

“Yes, they did,” replied Mrs. Simes, meaningly. “Is that cabman to come in, Stephen?”

“I’m afraid Robson can’t carry the boxes upstairs,” said Connie.

“You had better come in, Constance, and leave your luggage to the servants,” said Mr. Baring, laying his hand on his wife’s shoulder.

Constance instantly obeyed, and the two disappeared behind the studio door.

Mrs. Simes, with anything but an amiable look at Robson, was beginning to bargain with the cabman about the fare, when Robson quietly interrupted her with—

“Excuse me, ma’am, but I’ve paid the man.”

Mrs. Simes glared, but said nothing for the moment; and Robson, having

seen the luggage carried upstairs, followed to unpack her mistress's things.

Martha showed her into a bedroom which, although it compared favourably in point of size with the one Connie had occupied in Mrs. Chesham's house, was, in its unfurnished bareness, a great contrast to the smaller apartment so daintily appointed by Mabel's loving fingers.

Robson clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth as she looked round.

“What a barracks!” she muttered.

“Ay, you may well say that!” responded Martha, who was close behind her, desirous of making a good impression on this—to her—grand personage. “It just is a barracks; and as for the rations, as you may call 'em, they're simply hawful.”

Robson turned and looked at the girl, in her tawdry coloured frock, her hair

tousled into a fringe in front, and fastened up with gilt hair-pins behind—the very antithesis of all that represented a respectable and decent servant in Robson's eyes.

“Have you been here long?” she asked.

“Two months,” replied Martha, with a sigh—“two months; and I'm almost wore to skin and bone. The old 'un don't give us half enough to eat, and grudges us that.”

“How many of you are there downstairs?” asked Robson, with a lingering hope that this might turn out to be only a zealous scullery-maid.

“There used to be honly me,” responded Martha; “but old Skinflint, she went and hired a gal last week she calls a cook, and she's been a-teachin' her all the week how to make somethin' out of nothin'. I say, I wouldn't be your young

mistress for anythin'. For she is young, ain't she? I only got just a look at her before the master hurried her off, but she seemed to be about my hage. Whatever possessed her to go and marry 'im, eh?"

A shrill call from Mrs. Simes relieved Robson of the necessity of answering Martha's question; and, indeed, as it was one which had been puzzling the good woman herself for many weeks past, she would have found it hard enough to answer.

Meanwhile, Connie was skirmishing round the studio downstairs just in her old manner.

"Dear place! How glad I am to see it again! You'll let me sit here with you all day, won't you, Steve?"

"You can't when I'm painting from a

model," returned Baring, already busy with his easels.

"From a model? Oh, but you won't want any model but me," cried Connie. "I can be your model."

Baring smiled grimly.

"You'd soon get tired of the occupation."

"Oh, how unkind of you now!" pouted Connie. "Didn't I sit to you for hours and hours when I was not your wife, and can't I do the same for you now that I am?"

"Well, well, we'll see," said Baring, moving a pile of sketches from one table to another.

"I should like to go and change my dress for dinner," observed Connie, presently, "and Robson must get me a cup of tea. Will you have one, Stephen?"

“No, thanks,” said the artist, going over to where the lay figure stood.

“Not even if I bring it you myself?” asked his wife, coaxingly.

“No, thank you,” he repeated, without the least change of tone; and Connie went towards the door.

She had already touched the handle, when she turned back and, coming softly up to her husband, put her arms round his neck from behind, and whispered in his ear—

“Do you love me, Stephen?”

Mr. Baring's face was hidden from her, but a faint expression of weariness in his voice, as he replied almost mechanically, “Yes, dearest,” would have struck any one more keen of observation than Constance. She, however, seemed perfectly satisfied, and, with a bright “Good-bye,” disappeared.

Left alone, Baring straightened himself, and looked round the studio, glad to be back again in the only place which meant home to him. His eye wandered lovingly over each familiar object, and as it rested at last on the sketch of the picture he was going to paint next, which he had already put upon an easel, his features relaxed, his fingers itched to be at work, Connie and Robson faded into the background, and Stephen Baring, Royal Academician, was alone with his Art once more.

When, half an hour later, Connie trailed into the room, arrayed in a smart evening gown, she found her husband hard at work, and the studio looking as if he had never been away for an hour.

He glanced up reluctantly when she spoke to him, and, when he saw her, said with a frown—

“What on earth have you dressed yourself up like that for? You don't intend to go out to-night, do you?”

“No, of course not,” answered Constance, surprised. “I have only dressed for dinner, as usual. Are *you* not going to?”

Baring laughed.

“No, not quite,” he said, turning back to his work again. “I am not a fine gentleman. It is exceedingly absurd of you to do it; but, of course, you can please yourself.”

Connie's under-lip drooped.

“I didn't suppose—I thought—I thought it was all right. I have always done it all my life. It seemed only natural.”

Baring shrugged his shoulders and worked on in silence. Connie watched him with a face from which the usual con-

tented expression was missing. Presently she said timidly—

“I shall want a great many things, Stephen dear, that are not in my room. There seem to be no hot-water cans, and there is no long looking-glass—and——”

“Constance,” said Baring, laying down his brushes, and turning round so as to face his wife, “we had better understand one another once for all. I am afraid that you have overlooked the fact that I am a working-man——”

“Oh, how horrid, Stephen, to call yourself that, just as if you were a carpenter or a knife-grinder!”

“—a working-man who has his living to get. I thought you understood that.”

“So I did, so I do; but I don’t see what that has to do with my dressing for dinner.”

“Simply that I cannot afford to live like people whose income does not depend upon themselves. I work hard, and I have no desire to squander the money I earn.”

“But surely I can afford to do as I’ve always done with my own money?” said Connie.

Mr. Baring put up his hand to his mouth, while he looked at her reflectively. She was very good to look at in her pale-blue frock, which so exactly suited her hair and complexion. But there was no pleasure in the artist’s eyes as he contemplated her. He said abruptly—

“Don’t you know that the way your dress is made is perfectly hideous?”

Connie looked down at herself deprecatingly.

“Oh, please, Stephen, don’t be so cross! I won’t dress for dinner, or wear this

again, if you don't like. I am sure I don't care. And you'll let me get those things I want, won't you?"

"We can see about that," said Baring. "Now, if you *could* manage to keep quiet for a minute or two."

Connie sat, hardly daring to breathe, while Baring worked away for another half-hour, at the end of which Mrs. Simes rather acidly informed him that dinner was ready.

"We must get a gong, dear," said Connie, slipping her arm through his as he reluctantly obeyed the summons.

"I dislike a gong," answered her husband, dryly, and said no more until they reached the dining-room, whither Mrs. Simes had preceded them.

Connie looked round with amazement at the shabbily laid table, lighted by a

solitary candle, while the sideboard, before which stood Martha with a very sulky expression on her stolid features, was in utter darkness.

If Connie was surprised, Mrs. Simes was no less so.

“Bless me, what’s that for?” she exclaimed, without the least ceremony, pointing at Connie’s dress.

“It’s all right, aunt,” interposed Baring. “Constance thought we were grand people, sticklers for the correct thing.”

Mrs. Simes gave a contemptuous laugh; Martha stared open-eyed at her young mistress.

Never in her life before—at least, to her own knowledge, for she had been too young to remember her father’s penurious days—had Connie sat down to such a meal, served in such utter desolation. She thought of

her aunt's stately table, with its beautiful flowers and glittering silver and glass, waited upon by noiseless men-servants; Mrs. Chesham's dining-room rose before her, with its pretty oval table and less costly, but no less perfect, appointments, and the neat and well-trained parlour-maid. She looked at the common crockery and glass, she handled the dull spoons and forks, she gazed as far as the very circumscribed area of light would allow her, and she felt her heart sink within her. What did it mean? Were they savages, or what? It had never occurred to her that people had different styles and modes of living. She had divided the world into two classes—the rich, or the well-off, who were all ladies and gentlemen, and lived as such; and the poor, who were not ladies and gentlemen, and did not live as such.

She knew that Baring was reputed to make large sums of money, so he could not be poor. Why, then, did he live like this? She was so deeply engrossed in thought that she remained almost silent, and as neither her husband nor his aunt seemed to have much to say, the meal was not a lively one.

When, at its end, Baring got up, Connie rose too, saying—

“Are you going back to the studio, Stephen? Or shall we sit in the drawing-room?”

“I am going to the studio,” answered Baring. “But you needn’t come. Do as you like.”

“Perhaps you will be lonely if I go with Stephen?” Connie said hesitatingly to Mrs. Simes.

“Oh, you needn’t think about me,” that

lady rejoined. "I have a hundred things to see to downstairs."

Connie stared. What could there be to "see to" at that time of the evening?

"Then I'll come with you, Stephen," she said.

But Mr. Baring had already departed, without waiting for her.

Feeling somewhat desolate, Connie crossed the dimly lighted hall, and went into the drawing-room. It was in perfect darkness, and there was no fire. She groped her way to the bell, and rang it. After a long interval Martha appeared, and Connie, from the hall, said rather fretfully—

"Bring some lights, please, and light the drawing-room fire."

"Yes, mum," said Martha, after a pause.

She went downstairs, and Connie, finding waiting in the hall very chilly, went across to the studio, and softly opened the door. The room was brilliantly lighted by the sun-burner, and a large fire of logs burned cheerily in the old-fashioned chimney. Her husband, who was standing by a table filling his pipe, looked up with a slightly annoyed expression.

Connie came in and shut the door. She walked over to the fire, and spread out her hands, which were very cold. She felt chilly all over, poor little soul! The home-coming, to which she had looked forward so eagerly, had turned out very differently from her anticipations; she was disappointed, and as much puzzled as disappointed. She could not understand any of it.

“I went into the drawing-room,” she

said presently, "but there was no fire and no lights there. Wasn't that funny?"

"I fail to see the humour of the situation," returned her husband, striking a match for his pipe.

Connie raised her eyebrows.

"But where does Mrs. Simes sit in the evening? You told me she never comes in here."

"I'm sure I don't know," said Baring in a voice which implied, "And I'm sure I don't care."

"I told them to light the fire, but it looks so cosy in here, that I don't think I shall go back. You like to have me with you, don't you, Stephen?"

"Yes," said Stephen, with his pipe between his teeth.

"Come and sit down here, and let us have a nice talk, will you, Steve?"

Mr. Baring's brow contracted.

“ Well, just for this once. But I can't be made to waste my time, Constance. I have a great deal to get through before the Academy opens.”

He came to the fire, and threw himself into a capacious arm-chair before it.

Constance drew her chair close to his, and laid her hand upon his knee.

“ You surely needn't want to work the very first evening ? ” she said reproachfully.

“ What do you suppose is to become of me ? Why, Stephen, you are actually smoking a pipe ! ”

“ What is there astonishing in that ? ”

“ Oh, only that I've never seen you smoke anything but cigars. You always had cigars all the time we were away.”

“ Yes, and infernally dear I found them. At home I always smoke a pipe.”

“*Oh!*” said Constance. After a minute, she asked, “Stephen, are you poor? I never thought about it before, but to-night I fancied that perhaps—— I mean, as we are at home now, I should like to know.”

“Of course I’m poor,” said her husband, looking coldly at her. “I never pretended to be anything else.”

“But still, you make a great deal of money, don’t you?”

“Depends what you call a great deal.”

“Your income is larger than mine, isn’t it?”

“I wonder, Constance,” observed Baring slowly, “whether you think it in good taste to be continually talking about your income in the way you do.”

“I—I—didn’t suppose you minded!” said Connie in a very surprised tone.

“Any man would mind. Besides, I don't know why you say ‘*my*’ income. Your income and mine make but one—they are not separate.”

“Of course not, Stephen,” answered Connie submissively; “I never meant they were. You can have all my money if you like.”

Baring's mouth twitched slightly.

After a pause, Constance said, “I only asked because—because—everything is so different from what I've been——”

“Accustomed to?” Baring finished for her. “I suppose you mean that my house is not kept up with the same disregard of expense as your aunt's or Mrs. Chesham's? You must understand, my dear, that I am an enemy to waste; I dislike and abhor it, and will have none of it. You must leave off your old habits of luxury, which were

all very well in your old life, but are——
What on earth is the matter now?"

For Constance had flung herself back in her chair, and was crying convulsively.

"It is too hard," she sobbed. "If I had known I wasn't to dress for dinner, or have a fire in the drawing-room, I wouldn't have married you."

Mr. Baring stood up. This kind of thing was new to him.

"Be quiet, Constance!" he said. "How can you behave so?"

But Constance only rocked herself to and fro, and sobbed the louder.

Her husband laid a not very gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Constance!" he said severely.

Constance glanced up with streaming eyes, and then, to Baring's dismay, began to laugh hysterically.

He strode to the door, and holding it open, shouted impatiently for Robson, who came running downstairs with wonderful quickness for a woman of her age.

“Here, your mistress is ill,” he said in the abrupt, disagreeable tone which always roused Robson’s anger, although she was beginning to become accustomed to it by this time.

She hurried past him, and up to Connie, who was now in a regular hysterical fit.

“My poor lamb, what is it?” she asked, gathering her into her motherly arms.

Connie clung close to her, but continued to laugh and cry alternately.

Robson looked up after a minute and said, “If you’ll be good enough to ring the bell, if you please, sir, and tell the maid to get the sal volatile off my mistress’s

dressing-table; or perhaps you wouldn't mind getting it yourself, as she's so bad, poor thing!"

Baring stalked out of the studio with a brow as black as night. He had not bargained for scenes like this with the twenty thousand pounds.

"Be quiet, Miss Connie!" said Robson, firmly, as soon as he had left the room; "be quiet directly. You're a naughty girl to go on like this."

At the decisive voice, Constance made a visible effort to control herself, and Robson scolded and coaxed her until Mr. Baring returned with the *sal volatile*.

A dose of this brought Connie to herself, and as soon as she was better Robson took her away to bed.

When they had reached the bedroom, Constance fell on her knees before the bed,

buried her face in the counterpane, and began to cry afresh.

“Come now, child; no more nonsense,” said Robson.

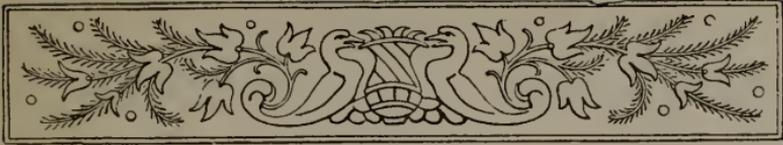
Constance suddenly got up and began walking backwards and forwards. “There was no fire—no light. He scolded me for having dressed for dinner. He says he is very poor. Robson, did you see what there was for dinner? *Dinner!*” she repeated mockingly. “Do you think they are mad in this house?”

“Mad! No, of course not. It’s only that Mrs. Simes; she’s no lady, and as stingy as a miser. There’s nothing to make such a fuss about, Miss Connie. It’s your house, and you can make any changes you like. But things can’t be done all in one evening. There now, dry your eyes, and let me brush your hair by the fire.

See what a nice one it is. I made Martha light it myself."

Connie allowed her hair to be brushed for a long time, until she felt soothed; and Robson put her to bed, quite determined to open a campaign against the miserly Mrs. Simes the very next day.





CHAPTER XI.

A WINDFALL.

AS was only natural, Mabel had felt Connie's departure very much. The two girls had been so constantly together, Connie had demanded so much of Mabel's time and thought, that there seemed quite a blank left in the latter's existence. Connie's presence had been good for her, too; it had forced her to brighten up to the wholesome occupations and interests of a girl's life, which seemed somehow or other to have slipped away from her in the solitariness of the days passed between her mother

and step-father. She had felt younger, had looked less *at* things, had lived *in* them more, and had found herself all the happier for so doing. And now that she was left alone again she missed the daily walks, the absorbing conversations that she had sometimes thought so frivolous, which occupied whole afternoons from luncheon to tea-time, to decide some momentous question of dress or fashion. How often had she wished that Constance would let her paint for an hour without sidling into the room, to "sit as still as a mouse," as she said, but in reality to chatter away and meddle with all Mabel's things, until she suddenly remembered that the smell of turpentine was an abomination, and Mabel must come down to her sitting-room and make tea!

Now Mabel could paint for as many

hours as she liked, without fear of being disturbed; and though she severely called herself an unreasonable mortal, she missed the old interruption sadly.

Mrs. Chesham, too, was sorry that Constance had gone, but for other reasons. George had taken the marriage very badly—quite as a personal affront. He had never relaxed his disagreeable manner towards Mr. Baring, who, however, remained to the last in the most utter unconsciousness of his offence. On the wedding-day itself he had first refused to go to the church at all, and when his wife, after an exhausting process of persuasion, had at length got him there, he behaved exactly as if he had been a rejected suitor, attracting every one's attention by his sighs and groans.

He had denounced Baring as a “mounte-

bank," and said Constance was a "fool." After which, he had shut himself up again, to consume a really startling amount of patent medicine and three-volume novels. He had been in the last stage of irritability and crossness ever since. At every meal he sniffed at the food, and "supposed that *now* anything was good enough for him." He scowled at Mabel and snubbed her whenever she opened her mouth, and spoke so savagely to the parlour-maid, who was under notice to leave, that she said downstairs that "if it were not for Miss Mabel and the mistress, she'd have forfeited her month's wages and been off at once."

In the midst of this somewhat gloomy state of affairs the horizon suddenly lightened. Mrs. Chesham came into some money—not a large fortune, but enough to fully compensate for Connie's loss.

The history of this legacy was a romantic one. A cousin of Mrs. Chesham's had been desperately in love with her some thirty years before. Knowing that his suit was hopeless, he had emigrated to Australia, had gone into trade, had married, had children, and made money. When his will was read, his widow, somewhat to her surprise, found that he had left the sum of seven thousand pounds to a cousin in England, whose name she had never even heard before.

Seven thousand pounds out of a quarter of a million had not seemed much to the Australian merchant, but it meant a very great deal to Mrs. Chesham. She had known well enough that John Vaughan had loved her, and deep down in a corner of her own heart had always kept a kindly remembrance of him. The recollection

grew and flourished now; "poor John" became "dear John;" and if John Vaughan were in any place in which the blessings and gratitude of two women could reach him, he must have found himself well repaid for that stroke of the pen which meant the memory of a lifetime.

His wife's legacy gave Mr. Chesham an opportunity for much anxious consideration. His wife had never mentioned "this John Vaughan" to him. That in itself was strange, for he had believed that her whole life was well known to him. Why should this man have left his wife seven thousand pounds? Mr. Chesham kept his brain too well fertilized with romances for it not to bear appropriate and abundant crops. After a whole day devoted to the subject, he suddenly evolved

a theory, from which future explanations and reasonings were powerless to move him.

“This John Vaughan,” as created by Mr. Chesham, was a cousin-lover of his wife’s, who had in some manner—by theft, forgery, or even perhaps murder, but let that pass—put himself within reach of the law. He had been transported to Botany Bay—the dates very *nearly* allowed this to be possible—where his superior education and talents had enabled them to come to the front, and to found the business which had produced such satisfactory results. He, Mr. Chesham, knew perfectly well that all the largest merchants in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, were either reformed convicts themselves, or the descendants of those earlier settlers who had, two or three generations back, borne a

broad arrow rampant as their crest, to which they might have added "*Ich dien*" as motto.

In vain did Mrs. Chesham, aghast at such a dreadful notion, explain over and over again that John had left England with the consent and approbation of his father, a clergyman long since dead, holding a living in one of the northern counties. Mr. Chesham was obstinate.

"No doubt, my dear—no doubt his father consented. Poor man, he had not much choice left him."

"I think it is perfectly shameful of you, George, to say such wicked, abominable things about a man who so kindly thought of us."

"Of *you*, love, of *you*," said Mr. Chesham, raising a deprecatory, boneless-looking white hand. "Pray remember that this—"

ahem!—gentleman was no relation whatever to me.”

“I wonder you take the money, if you think so badly of mother’s cousin,” Mabel, who was present, could not help saying.

Mr. Chesham turned his eyes slowly on his step-daughter, then up to the ceiling, moved heavily in his arm-chair, and finally said—

“Before giving vent to your exceedingly interesting remarks, Mabel, it might be as well to wait and ascertain whether they are to the point or not. You can, I think, always leave my own self-respect in my own hands. I was just about to say to your mother that, this legacy of hers having come from so very suspicious a source, it would, of course, be out of the question for me to make use of it in any way.”

“Good gracious, George!” exclaimed Mrs. Chesham; “have you taken leave of your senses?”

“No, my dear love, I have not, although the temptation to bid farewell to those imperious rulers of our lives has at times, I confess, assailed me. At this present moment, however, they are with me, all seven.”

“But what do you propose doing with the money?” gasped his poor little wife.

Mr. Chesham folded his hands, and seemed prepared to give the matter the most cheerful consideration.

“Well, my dear, there are hospitals, and charitable institutions, and societies. Let me see—suppose I make you a little list, and then we can decide together.”

Mrs. Chesham cast her despairing eyes towards her daughter. Mabel was leaning

back in her chair with an amused, but distinctly scornful, smile on her features. Suddenly the little woman's face lighted up; she turned towards her husband.

“Why, George, you are forgetting!” she said. “Neither you nor I can touch the capital of this money. It goes into my settlement.”

Mr. Chesham gave a tragic start.

“So it does, so it does. I had forgotten. Of course, as that is so, my dear, the discussion is closed. We must try to forget what Fate has left us no escape from.”

“There is the interest,” suggested Mabel, mischievously. “You could divide that between the hospitals, and institutions, and societies.”

“It is a fine day, my love,” said Mr. Chesham, looking at his wife. “I should

like my books changed, if any one be at leisure."

"Any one" meaning Mabel, she collected the volumes, and beat a retreat, with a more amused and disrespectful smile than ever.

There was no further question about the legacy; and Mrs. Chesham, to whom no number of years could give a comprehension of her husband's tortuous ways of thought, and who always believed that George meant everything he said, allowed herself to be comforted.

This scene had taken place during Constance's honeymoon. A day or two after Mabel knew they had returned, she was making up her mind to go that afternoon and call upon Mrs. Baring, when Connie anticipated her intention by bursting into her studio like a whirlwind.

After rapturous greetings, Connie said—

“Now go on painting, and let’s talk. Ugh! horrid turpentine! But I live in it now—I believe I wash my face in it every morning, so never mind. Tell me all you’ve been doing. How is dear Mrs. Chesham? They told me downstairs she was out.”

“Yes; she’s gone to do some shopping,” said Mabel.

“Ha! ha! So am I. I am to buy—‘a pair of chickens, my dear. Mind, you must not give more than two and fourpence each, and get the very largest you can.’”

“Two and fourpence!” ejaculated Mabel.

“Yes; four and eightpence the two.”

“Is that your housekeeping?” asked Mabel, smiling.

“Not mine. Mrs. Simes’s.”

“Do you get on well with her?”

Connie assumed a doleful expression.

“She’s a most horrid old woman. She almost starves the servants; and as for poor me——”

“How does Robson like that?”

“She doesn’t like it at all. She and Mrs. Simes hate each other, and I hate Mrs. Simes. You don’t know how dreadful she is, Mabel.”

“Perhaps she will get better if you are friendly with her, and get your own way tactfully,” said Mabel, although her hopes of Connie’s tact were but small.

“No; there’s no chance of that. She is a born miser. She has not the remotest idea of how a lady lives. To hear her talk, you’d think Stephen and I were paupers.”

“Is Mr. Baring very busy yet?” asked Mabel, more for the sake of changing the subject than anything else.

“Oh yes, he’s busy; at least, he stays in the studio from the time he gets up until he goes to bed,” said Connie, in the same fretful tone she had fallen into after her first few words. “I can tell you, Mabel, you needn’t be in a hurry to be married. It’s awfully dull. I think my aunt was a wise woman.”

Mabel made some jesting answer, but she was inwardly dismayed at Connie’s evident dissatisfaction. She said to herself, however, that neither Mr. Baring nor his wife were people who would easily fall into each other’s ways, and that time would probably mend and soften matters. She had so often felt that if she were a man, Constance’s childish, inconsequent

chatter would be almost intolerable, that she could not help sympathizing very strongly with Mr. Baring. He had brought it on himself, though, and must learn to make the best of things, both for himself and his young wife, whose faults were only those of nature. She talked and laughed until Connie's pretty face lost its unwonted air of despondency, although even then Mabel noticed a certain softness about her which savoured more of genuine affection and less of indolent dependence than of old.

After an hour she rose regretfully, and said she must go.

“Won't you stay to luncheon?” asked Mabel.

“No; I must go home. But I'll tell you what, Mab. You come home with me. Oh, do, *do!*”

Mabel saw no reason for resisting Connie's evidently sincere pleading, and in a few minutes the girls set out together.

"We must take a hansom," Connie said, when they were in the street. "It's expensive, but I can't help that. I'm so tired."

"Why, Connie, you're as bad as Mrs. Simes!" laughed Mabel.

"Oh, that's not me," returned Constance, with a shake of her head. "It's Stephen. He says cabs are luxuries, and that I ought to go in an omnibus. Just fancy, Mabel!"

When they arrived at the artist's house, Constance paid the cabman in a hurried manner, and waited until he had driven off before she rang the bell.

"Miss Moore will stay to luncheon," she said to Martha, when that stolid young

person had at length opened the door, and they had gone in.

“Come up to my room,” Connie went on, taking hold of Mabel’s arm.

In the bedroom they found Robson, a very much more grim and sad-faced Robson than Mabel had ever seen before.

She greeted Mabel warmly, and then busied herself about her young mistress in the tender, all-comprehensive manner which had rendered Connie almost as helpless as an infant, and which always made Mabel expect to see her friend finished off with a clean pinafore and a kiss.

Robson had managed to make the bedroom a very different place from what it had been a few days before, but all the same it struck Mabel as bare and unhome-like. Robson noticed her glance round.

“Not much like Miss Connie’s room in

your mamma's house, ma'am, is it?" she said acidly. "But never mind. We'll make it cosy yet, in spite——"

She finished the sentence in an inaudible murmur, for she was very anxious to make the best of things, for her excitable nursing's sake.

Mabel felt rather sad as they went downstairs together. She had certainly not expected things to be as bad as this.

Luncheon was ready. Mr. Baring and Mrs. Simes were already seated.

The artist welcomed Mabel with particular politeness, Mrs. Simes with as particular coolness. The latter had no intention of encouraging Constance's visitors, and least of all this bosom friend of hers.

Constance took her seat, not at the head of the table—that was already occupied by

Mrs. Simes—but at her husband's left hand, leaving the other side for Mabel.

“I am afraid we have nothing to offer your friend that she will like, Mrs. Baring,” Mrs. Simes took the opportunity of saying, the instant there was a pause in the conversation.

“I dare say not,” Connie returned in the tone of a sulky school-girl.

“Oh, anything will do for me,” said Mabel, flushing.

Mr. Baring appeared not to have heard these remarks, but went on cutting some very hard cold salt beef with perfect unconcern.

The beef was quite good enough for Mabel, whose appetite was too healthy to be dainty. The evidently contented manner in which she ate her luncheon won her several approving glances from

Mrs. Simes, although that lady considered that the guest's appreciation had been quite sufficiently marked, and that there was no occasion for her to have accepted a second helping, a weakness of which Mrs. Simes herself had not been guilty since she had arrived at years of discretion.

Constance, on the other hand, sat and regarded her plate in stony silence, then took up her knife and fork, put an infinitesimal morsel between her lips, and finally, with a gesture expressive of disgust, folded her hands in her lap, and asked for a piece of bread.

"Are you ill, Mrs. Baring?" inquired Mrs. Simes, with some asperity.

"Oh no, thanks," answered Connie, languidly.

"You seem to have no appetite," said Mrs. Simes, severely.

Constance looked at the offending rather thick slice of beef, raised her eyebrows, and drawled out a "No" which made Mabel long to shake her.

Mr. Baring had been talking to Mabel. She had asked a question about their recent journey, and he was enumerating the places at which he and his wife had stayed.

"Was Paris as nice as you had thought it would be, Connie?" Mabel asked.

"No," Connie answered very decisively. "I'd thought it was lovely shops, and instead of that, there were only more picture-galleries there than anywhere else. Oh, that horrid Louvre! You remember, Mabel, how I always longed to see the Louvre shop, and Stephen never would take me in once."

Mr. Baring laughed, and Mabel joined

him. Picture-galleries were dearer than a shop to her, too.

“Did you go to the play at all?”

“No,” said Baring. “It’s only a waste of money and time to go and see those French fellows play, when you can’t follow the language very well.”

“No; and although I told Stephen that if he couldn’t understand, I could, and begged him at least to take me once to the Français, he wouldn’t,” said Connie.

Mr. Baring seemed in no wise disconcerted or displeased at his wife’s indiscretions of speech. On the contrary, he laughed in a satisfied manner, and looked at Connie, Mabel thought, very kindly.

Mabel had never liked the artist so well before. Mr. Baring was purposely taking a good deal of trouble towards this end, for he wanted to make Mabel feel at home

in his house. He did not find it difficult to talk to her, since he knew she was genuinely and intelligently interested in art, and on art he was always ready to talk.

Mabel admired the enthusiasm that rose to his eye, and which made the upper part of his face as noble as she could have imagined an ancient Greek painter's to have been. At the same time, she could not help noticing the discrepancies between the artist's ideas and the language he used to express them. It seemed so odd to hear one of the greatest of living French painters, whose method was not approved of by Mr. Baring, described as "that duffer S——," and to be told that another man's work "riled" him "awfully."

But the next moment she told herself that elegance of diction was, after all, not a primary necessity, and blamed herself for

exercising so freely what Mr. Chesham ironically termed "her valuable critical faculty."

As soon as luncheon was over, Mr. Baring led the way to the studio, where he had some sketches he wanted Mabel to see.

Constance, who had ostentatiously eaten hardly anything, threw herself into a chair without a glance at what her husband had been doing that morning, and began at once, fretfully—

"I can't stand it, Stephen. I shall be starved to death soon."

Baring, without turning from the portfolio over which he was bending, said quietly, "What are you talking about, Constance?"

"Mrs. Simes's housekeeping. She knows I can't eat that kind of food, and yet she pays not the slightest attention. Would

you believe it, Mabel, we had that dreadful salt beef twice yesterday—once at luncheon and again in the evening? And so it will go on until it is finished.”

“We’ll have some chocolate creams on purpose for you to-morrow, Connie,” said Baring, in the tone one uses to a peevish child.

“I don’t want chocolate creams. Don’t be so absurd, Stephen. I only want something I can eat, and I’m sure that’s not much to ask for—is it, Mabel?”

Mabel looked at her reproachfully without speaking. She felt very angry with Connie.

“I wish,” Constance went on, after pausing for the answer from Mabel which did not come—“I wish, Stephen, that you would let Robson do the housekeeping. Poor Mrs. Simes is so totally incapable,

and Robson knows all about that sort of thing so well."

Baring turned sharply and looked at Constance. He said not a word, but after a moment Constance flung round in her chair with a muttered exclamation; after which an embarrassing silence, as it seemed to Mabel, ensued. She was the first to break it.

"Isn't that a new piano?" she asked Baring, looking across at the instrument which occupied the top wall of the studio.

"No; it was always here, only not in that place," answered the artist. "Do you play at all?"

"Yes," said Mabel; and Mr. Baring noticed the omission of the usually inevitable "a little."

"Play now," he said, in the quietly authoritative manner which somehow so

few people, especially women, felt inclined to disobey.

Mabel walked over to the piano, Mr. Baring's eye following her free, graceful, and thoroughly unconscious movements with a keen sense of pleasure. He sat down where he could see her to the best advantage, and, without troubling himself to ask either of the girls' permission, lighted his pipe.

Mabel found the piano an excellent one. She began to play softly, without the customary formula of a pretended indecision as to her choice, and a sudden inspiration, which seems the prelude to nearly every girl's performance.

Mabel's music was a great part of her. It was not like any one else's music; it seemed to belong to her, to have become in some subtle way individualized with

her. Her little brother had once said of it, "Mab's music is so *friendly*;" and Mrs. Chesham felt that she knew exactly what the child meant, although every one had laughed at the expression. It *was* friendly, for it did just what a friend should do. It was firm and strong; there was no half-touch, no hesitation, no weak slurring over, with a pretence at brilliancy. The piano seemed to be having its very best qualities drawn out of it, instead of being used only as the long-suffering means of exhibiting the performer's sleight of hand; although there was no want of spirit and decision, the effect was purely one of sweetness and tenderness, the pathetic and simple predominating over the exuberant and intricate. It was the very music for an artist; and Mr. Baring, as he leaned back, lazily puffing out volumes of smoke, with his

eyes fixed on Mabel's beautiful face, on which the expression continually varied as she played, felt that he had done very well for himself in marrying a wife who had twenty thousand pounds, and such an exceedingly charming friend into the bargain.

He said "Go on" several times when Mabel paused; but at last she rose from the piano, rather wondering that Constance remained so absolutely silent. She went round to her arm-chair, and found that Mrs. Baring had temporarily forgotten her woes. Connie was fast asleep, curled up in the big chair, with one little palm supporting her head, and so child-like an expression of peace on her innocent features, that Mabel felt the displeasure which had arisen in her heart against her die away as she looked at her. She drew Mr. Baring's attention to his wife.

“How pretty Connie looks! You ought to paint her so,” she said.

Baring looked at the Sleeping Beauty with indifference. “Not in my line,” he said shortly; and then, beginning to refill his pipe—“Won’t you go on playing? That was a very jolly thing you played just now.”

“*A jolly thing!*” Mabel felt as if she had had a cold douche. It happened to have been an Andante of Beethoven’s, which bit Mabel never could play without feeling it to her very soul.

Mr. Baring apparently appreciated it also, but oh, why could he not say so in terms less grating!

She went back and played on for some time, Mr. Baring after a while getting up and going on with his painting. The studio was perfectly quiet, and Mabel had

almost forgotten that she was not in the drawing-room at home, when the door was flung open and Martha's untrained voice roughly announced, "Mr. Durant."

It was Hubert, come to pay his first visit to his newly married sister. His eyes brightened as he perceived Mabel; he had not seen her since Constance's wedding-day.

Baring received his brother-in-law politely, if not over-cordially.

Constance, aroused by Martha's voice, sat up, half dazed, and blinked at him; but directly she had made him out, flew at him, embracing him with an ardour to which he was wholly unaccustomed.

"Dear old Hubert, I *am* so glad to see you! Why didn't you come sooner?"

"I've been away, painting a portrait."

"You poor absurd boy! So you haven't

given up yet! Take my advice, Hubert, and do something else. It's a very uninteresting profession, even if one happens to be a genius, like Stephen; but when one's not even that, like——”

“Me,” laughed Hubert. “Bravo, Connie! that's most encouraging.”

The two men began to talk, and Mabel and Connie sat near each other, Connie seeming half inclined to doze again. Mabel thought Hubert looking very fagged and worn, and although he appeared cheerful enough, she noticed how every now and then his features fell into a settled expression of almost sullen despondency, which she never remembered to have seen on them before.

“Come up to my room,” Connie whispered presently; and they went up accordingly.

“Oh, that continual art, art! How I hate it!” groaned Constance, as they mounted the stairs.

“But, Constance, you shouldn’t have married an artist, if you never wanted to hear him speak about art!”

“I don’t see that he need talk about it. If one married a butcher, one wouldn’t want to hear about nothing but raw joints for the rest of one’s days.”

This seemed perfectly reasonable to Mabel, but she felt that it was a different thing.

“Did you see how Stephen stopped my complaining of Mrs. Simes? He always does. His one answer is that she is invaluable.”

“I think he was quite right to mind your speaking so before me,” said Mabel, determined, since Connie had begun, to

let her know what she thought of her behaviour.

“Why shouldn’t I speak before you?” asked Connie, surprised.

“Husbands and wives don’t, as a rule, quarrel or reprove each other before a third person.”

“I wasn’t quarrelling or reprovng,” cried Connie. “I will tell him—every day—what I think of Mrs. Simes. I shall go on until he sends her away. You don’t know half I have to put up with from that woman.”

“Behaving so foolishly yourself won’t make her in the wrong,” said Mabel.

Connie, in self-defence, launched forth into a long and confused account of her sufferings under Mrs. Simes’s iron rule. A good deal of it, if it had been told calmly and reasonably, was really annoying

enough; but, as it was, Mabel could only gather a vague impression of what seemed to her very petty details, magnified wholly beyond their real importance. A young and, therefore, severe judge, she was inclined to put down all Connie's discomfort to one person, namely, Connie herself.

Constance saw that she was not sympathized with, and felt all the angrier. She ended her tirade with—

“I see you don't care a bit. I shall go down to the studio, and insist, before Hubert, on Stephen's dismissing Mrs. Simes!”

“Connie, Connie, you must not do anything of the sort,” said Mabel, holding her fast. “Your husband would never forgive you, and Hubert would not like to come here any more. Robson, persuade Mrs. Baring to calm herself.”

Robson had just come into the room. She pushed Connie, who was fast working herself up into her customary state of excitement when contradicted, back into her chair, with a sharp word or two which had instant effect. Connie's heat subsided as quickly as it had arisen, and in another half-hour she was following Mabel downstairs to tea, talking away as merrily as if no such person as Mrs. Simes existed.

Mrs. Simes had very reluctantly given in to the custom of daily afternoon tea, after a sharp fight on the point with Constance. She continued to protest against the extravagance, however, by never honouring the meal with her appearance, a deprivation which, it must be confessed, Constance bore with the utmost cheerfulness.

Mabel accepted Hubert's offer of walking home with her, and took leave of Connie, promising to come again soon.

"Mind you do," were Baring's last words to her, accompanied by a full look out of the eyes that seemed to see so much and so far.

"Connie is getting on all right, I think," observed Hubert, who would probably only have noticed anything wrong if he had seen Constance scream and cry.

"Yes," said Mabel. "How have you been progressing lately?"

"As brilliantly as ever," answered Hubert, with a sharp laugh. "I shall be President soon!"

"When will you be *patient*?" asked Mabel, reproachfully.

“I *am* patient. I don't stop working,” said Hubert, stolidly.

“No. But you're always complaining,” Mabel could not help saying, a little warmly perhaps. How people did grumble!

“Only to you,” Hubert said in a softer tone. “You don't suppose I wear my heart on my sleeve for every one's benefit, do you? However, I dare say you're right. It isn't manly to show any feeling of any kind. One must be a perfect stoic.”

“You know I didn't mean that,” Mabel said. “I am only sorry you should always be so despondent, because I can't help thinking that continual brooding over his disappointments must take away from a person's power of putting the very best he has into his work.”

“Of course you’re right,” said Hubert again, but this time in a less ironical tone. “You always make me feel ashamed of myself, although you give me fresh courage, too.”





CHAPTER XII.

A NEW FRIEND.

HUBERT was in sore need of a helping hand just at this time. He was leading a life which, to a young man brought up as he had been, was calculated sooner or later to tell upon his health. He had been used to riding and hunting, had always passed the greater part of each day out of doors, had been as ignorant as a child of the cares and worries which beset the poor. True, he had enough to buy bread-and-cheese with from the year's beginning

to its end ; he was far better off in that respect than the journalist who lived on the opposite side of the landing, and whose daily food depended on the copy that cost him so much labour to write, and which was of such trivial value when it was done. Hubert had taken up his life bravely enough, believing that he had counted the cost and that he was ready to bear any privations for his art's sake, but—he had not been in love then. The day which should bring him fame had not seemed so hopelessly far off as did now the day which should bring him Mabel. He was impatient for that day ; he grudged the time which was passing though he and his love were not together. He wanted to be happy while he was still young enough to enjoy. The honours of the Royal Academy would sit well upon

a grizzled head; he could wait for them, but he wanted Mabel soon.

His case seemed to him quite hopeless; however hard he worked, fame and fortune could only come by slow, very slow degrees, and perhaps, when they did come, it would be too late. He allowed himself to brood over such thoughts until they became his hourly companions, obtruding themselves between him and his work, and taking all the pleasure, and most of the interest, out of the latter.

Just at this time he made a new friend, a French artist, a few years older than himself, who rejoiced in the name of Victor Barthélemy. Barthélemy was a man of a certain amount of talent, though it was the kind of talent which rarely carries its owner far. He possessed that gift which to some people is more disastrous than a

total lack of ability—the gift of facility. He had been a prodigy in his student days in Paris, the favourite of his masters, the admiration of his comrades. Nothing was difficult to him; what other young men plodded at for month after month, Barthélemy appeared to master by intuition. He understood the anatomy of the human form divine in this convenient way; his proportions were instinctively all right. His colouring was astonishing for so young a man, while as for his ideas, they were simply transcendent. He was an admirable talker, and as he could do so much without practice, he was accustomed to talk while his comrades were working. All this was when he was twenty; he was thirty now, and he was still talking. His work was as clever now as then, but no cleverer and no better; and what had

been very good indeed in a student, lost half its merit as the production of a grown man.

His companions, whom he had despised as good but dull fellows, had, one by one, passed him. This one had won the *Prix de Rome*; that one was already well known as a landscape painter; another was on the sure road to renown as a sculptor—all, except Barthélemy, had done something. With advancing prosperity they had, perhaps, grown more critical and cynical. Barthélemy said they had, and he certainly gave himself every opportunity of knowing, for he haunted their studios with the most exemplary faithfulness. Somehow they no longer seemed to care to hear him talk as of old. A shrug of the shoulders or a sarcastic smile was all he got where formerly there had been open-mouthed

admiration. Although five-franc pieces were more plentiful now, they did not make their appearance with such alacrity as in the happy-go-lucky days, when every one's purse was every one's else's, unless, as generally happened with Barthélemy, he had no purse, in which case, of course, the transaction was limited to the one side.

His old friends seemed weary of him; they were kind still for the sake of the old *camaraderie*, but they were not cordial. The one among them all who had been, for a time, Barthélemy's most fervent disciple, and who, probably in consequence of that very circumstance, had succeeded beyond the others, when he married a young, pretty, and rich girl, had actually written to Barthélemy, informing him that his new studio was in his own hotel, and that—in short, he would be glad if Barthé-

lemy would forget the address at once and for ever. Worst insult of all, the letter had enclosed a hundred-franc note.

Barthélemy knew too well, if all the others had forgotten, what was due to “auld lang syne” to return the bank-note; but his heart had received a wound, which he said, would bleed for ever.

Circumstances over which, no doubt, he had no control, although it was unfortunate it should have been so, shortly after this, rendered it imperative for Barthélemy to try change of air for a while. He came to London, where he had been picking up a precarious living for about a year before he fell in with Hubert Durant, to whom he at once attached himself with all the impulsive fervour of his character.

Barthélemy was a creature of altogether a new species to Hubert. Since he had

left Layton Abbey, he had made no fresh friends, and his old ones, the sons of the county families with whom his aunt had been in relation, had either forgotten him or he them. Miss Durant had never let him fly far from her wing, not even as far as Paris.

His tutor, the only man he had ever known very intimately, was, although a most excellent, well-read, and in every way desirable companion, not one calculated to call forth any enthusiasm in a boy's mind. Mr. Wrack's own mind was as neatly and evenly balanced as are the three sides of an equilateral triangle, and he had never seen very far into that of his pupil. Under his tuition, however, Hubert had picked up, among other things, a greater knowledge of French than falls to the lot of other boys, who have not the advantage of being

under so able a man. The tutor, like Mr. Lillyvick in "Nicholas Nickleby," "didn't think much" of French, when it was learned, but until it was learned it was an object for conscientious study.

Barthélemy, therefore, found his new friend exceedingly well versed in his language, particularly in the curious idioms thereof. His accent was beautifully Saxon, but rapidly improved until it became not "absolute torture" to the fastidious Frenchman's ear. Entirely new ground, like this simple young man's mind, was a fresh and exceedingly delightful discovery to Monsieur Barthélemy. He lost no time in setting about its cultivation. He first of all dug it up entirely, from end to end, turning it over until he thought he knew every inch of it, rooting out insular and countrified prejudices, mixing up the good

but somewhat dry soil with more flexile and fertilizing matter, and finally planted it with weeds of various sorts, all calculated to bear after their kind.

Zola, De Maupassant, and their like he found it no good to sow; they would not come up. He was forced to abandon the realistic school, with which indeed he had not much sympathy, and which was simply abhorrent to Hubert. Murger, Théophile Gautier, and Baudelaire were quite another thing, however. Hubert drank deep of each of these, marvelling that he should have been so ignorant before. Baudelaire, above all, with his morbid, moonlight fancies, especially fascinated him. He even went the length of getting himself some hashish, in order to see whether the same visions would not visit him. Barthélemy, who was really actuated by no particular

motive or hope of advantage, was amused at the effect his initiations had produced. His own enthusiasms had rarely gone so far.

De Quincey, Hoffmann, and Edgar Allan Poe helped Hubert a little further on the unreal, slippery path he was treading. It was not long before the effects of his recent studies showed themselves in his daily life. He began to keep irregular hours; he, who had been wont to be at his easel every morning by eight o'clock, now often spent the morning in bed, wrapped in an uneasy slumber, more like stupor than healthy sleep. When at length he dragged himself up, he had neither the inclination nor the energy for work. His appetite failed him. He passed whole days without touching a brush, sunk in a condition of deepest despondency.

Barthélemy had lounged into the studio one evening, when Hubert was particularly despairing of himself, Mabel, his work, everything.

After a few well-meant, but utterly un-availing efforts at consolation, the Frenchman suddenly said, from among the volumes of smoke he was pouring forth from his great black pipe—

“I know how you could make money, *mon cher*—heaps of it.”

“How?” asked Hubert, languidly, without raising his eyes. He was lying on his bed.

“By abandoning those ridiculous things you have painted hitherto, and striking out a new line for yourself. Your countrymen are eternally on the gape for something new. If you can once catch their fancy, your fortune is made.”

“ Why don't you make your own, then ? ”
said Hubert, indifferently.

Barthélemy shrugged his shoulders.

“ Because I—look you, my boy—I am a *vaurien*. I cannot work. I have the ideas, but not the patience. But you are a true plodding Englishman. Your blood is not quicksilver, like mine.”

“ What do you want me to do, then ? ”

“ As I said, to strike out a new line. Your Academy is full of nude and half-nude figures—nymphs, goddesses, classical beauties. Beauty plump and fair ; beauty, so called, wan and lean—allegorical, historical, fashionable—all one more *fade* than the other. Why should one always paint the beautiful ? It is common, and our first effort should be not to be common. True, your painters very often—generally—fail to paint the beautiful, but their intention

is to do so. Now, why should you not paint——”

“The unbeautiful?” said Hubert. “No, thank you.”

“I was not going to say the unbeautiful, but the bizarre, the fantastic, the whimsical.”

Hubert passed his hand wearily across his brow. His head ached too much for Barthélemy's words to reach him very clearly.

Barthélemy was warming with his subject. He sprang up, and began walking to and fro, waving his pipe between the puffs to illustrate his ideas.

“See—instead, for instance, of a half-clad simpering beauty, with an English forehead and coiffure *à la Grecque*, whose only *raison d'être* is the showing as much of herself, painted as truthfully as possible,

why not give them one of Baudelaire's or Gautier's '*petites vieilles ratatinées*'?

'Œil vert, profonde bouche,
Dents noires, front coupé de rides, doigts noueux,
Dos voûté, pied tortu sous une jambe torse,
Voix rauque, âme plus laide encore que son écorce,
Le diable n'est pas plus hideux.'

That would be interesting to paint, *hein?* Or, here's another thing. The interior of a curiosity shop—the inner room, you know. No human figures at all, but all the curiosities holding their sabbath. Articles from every corner of the earth, each with a physiognomy and weird signification of its own? Do you see it?"

Hubert was listening now. He nodded without speaking.

"Paint Balzac's Tobias Guarnerius making his dying mother's last breath enter his infernal violin through a tube going from her mouth to the body of the

instrument. She is dying of cancer, and her son, far from feeling the remotest pity for her torture, has all his faculties fixed on the successful transmission of her soul into his violin. Or, if you can't do without beauty, paint Baudelaire's colossal Venus, against whose pedestal a court jester, clad in his ridiculous costume, cap and bells, leans in an attitude of dejection, with uplifted eyes full of tears, while the implacable Venus looks into the distance with her marble eyes."

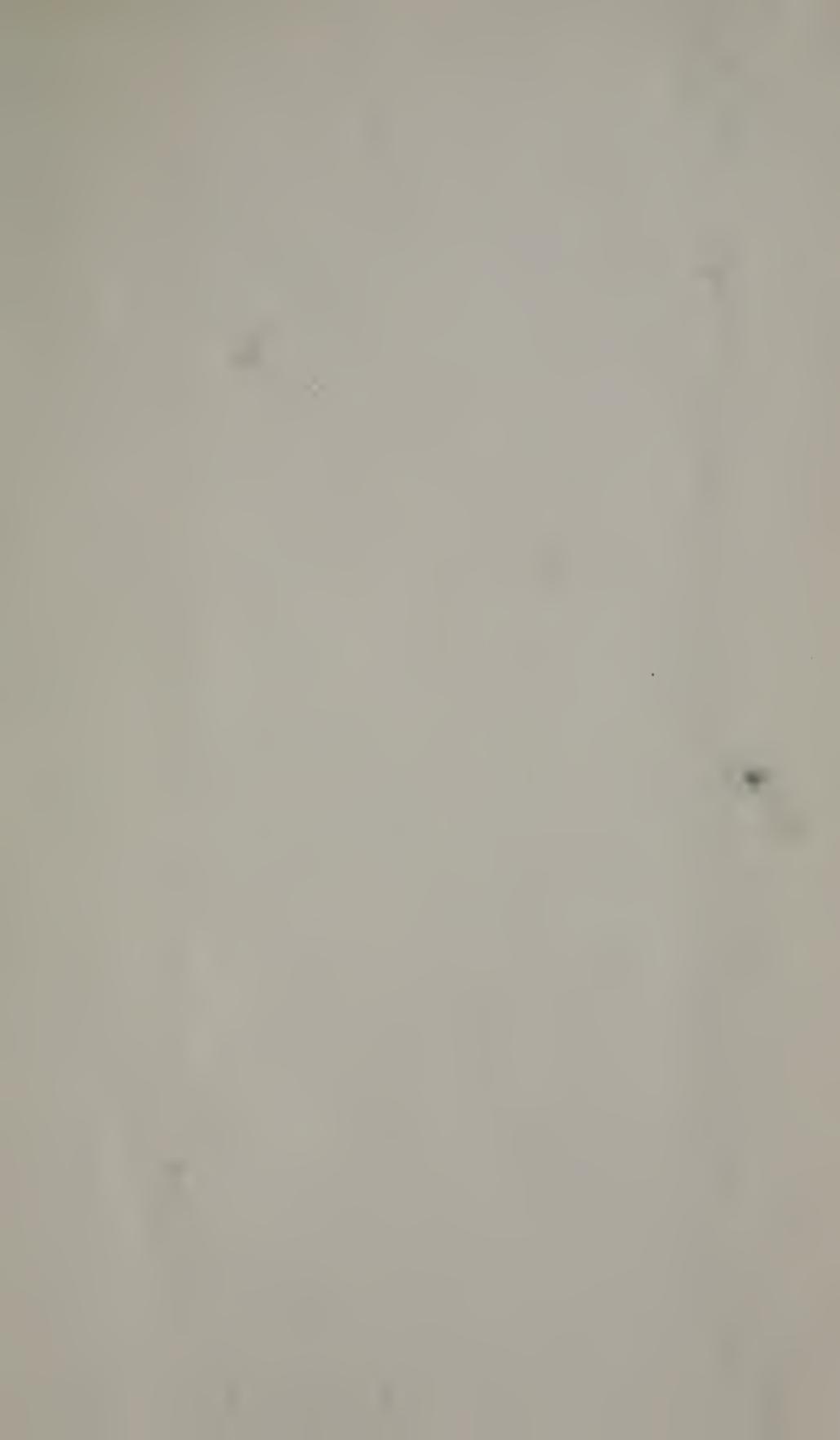
"That's enough!" said Hubert. "Do shut up now."

"I'm not saying you need actually go to these authors, you know," Barthélemy went on, without heeding the interruption. "You have quite sufficient imagination of your own, I should think, to find fresh subjects for yourself; but that's the kind of

thing I mean. Now go to bye-bye. I don't believe you've heard a single word I've said;" and, refilling his pipe with Hubert's tobacco, Barthélemy opened the door, and clattered headlong down the uncarpeted stairs.

END OF VOL. I.







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